Teen And Up Audiences

No Archive Warnings Apply

M/M

The Hobbit - J. R. R. Tolkien
The Hobbit - All Media Types
The Hobbit (Jackson Movies)

Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield
Dwalin/Ori

Bilbo Baggins
Thorin Oakenshield
Thorin's Companions
Dís
Kíli
Fíli
Ori (Tolkien)
Nori
Óin
Dwalin
Balin

Here lies insanity
but at least there will be cake
okay I may have lied about the cake
but not about the insanity that stuff is still there
PDA makes other people feel incredibly awkward about themselves
especially to poor Ori
I'm so sorry Ori
Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies
Slow Build
Fix-It

English Part 1 of The Inevitable Universe Next Work → Bucketful o'Laughs , My Heart Adores , I love you so , Isabelle Disraeli's Fanfiction Recommendations , Start Reading , Irreplaceablegems , Favorites , Grade A Works , Qqqqqq115 , tolkien favoritos

The Inevitable Love Story between Two Oblivious Idiots

Bgtea

Summary:

In which everyone sees the budding romance between Thorin and Bilbo, except, of course, for Thorin and Bilbo themselves.

Also, Dis brings the fear of God in other Dwarves and likes to meddle in her big brother's romantic life, and if she has to do this through scathingly written letters, then so be it.

Notes:

- Translation into Русский available: Неизбежная история любви двух рассеянных идиотов (https://archiveofourown.org/works/9398912) by Bereniska (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Bereniska/pseuds/Bereniska)

(See the end of the work for other works inspired by this one (#children) .)

Chapter 1 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1290400)

Notes:

Betaed by ArielT. Thank you so much for all of your awesome help, as always! If you're interested, you can follow me: bgtea.tumblr.com

The response I've received for this fic is absolutely phenomenal, I'm completely blown away! All my thanks to:

1. daysofsummer for her Chinese translation of this story (https://archiveofourown.org/works/775620/chapters/1458993) ,

2. feignedsobriquet (on tumblr), who made this absolutely jaw-droppingly gorgeous fanart (https://feignedsobriquet.tumblr.com/post/47628881544) (inspired by Chapter 5 so don't click into it if you don't want any spoilers).

3. elenorasweet, who drew the sweetest and most perfect Thorin and Bilbo (https://elenorasweet.tumblr.com/post/54292931274/so-there-was-an-update-of-the-inevitable-love) (spoilers for Chapter 9).
Your support never cease to put the largest grin on my face. :D

4. darthstitch and her hilarious collection of fanfics inspired by this series (https://archiveofourown.org/series/50656) .

5. hattedhedgehog, who drew this series of mini-comics that are seriously the best thing. Ever. (https://hattedhedgehog.tumblr.com/post/56028892657/inspired-a-scene-in-chapter-6-of-the-inevitable) (Spoilers for Chapters 6 and 9).

6. hattedhedgehog again with her fantastic, hilarious comic that captured the soul of this fic. Well done. (https://hattedhedgehog.tumblr.com/post/77600317857/durin-family-erebor-correspondence-from-bgteas) (Spoilers for Chapters 1 - 3-ish).

7. shippingcloset's amazing art for Chapter 12. (https://bgtea.tumblr.com/post/102699247238/fanart-for-inevitable-chapter-12-i-received) These were a commission from a reader. Thank you so much!! (Spoilers for Chapter 12).

8. shipandfanart's stunning Bilbo/Thorin scene from Chapter 8. Absolutely fantastic! (https://shipandfanart.tumblr.com/post/139126656945/i-loved-the-inevitable-love-story-between-two) (Spoilers for Chapter 8).

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_1_endnotes) .)

I. Dís

From Erebor, 2941.
To my sister Dís,
The Mountain is secured.
Fíli and Kíli are doing well.
I am alive.
- T
P.S. Please feed the Raven.

To my cruel, neglectful brother Thorin,

I see that you are as eloquent as ever. I'm so glad that all those lessons in writing and grammar that were taught in your youth have paid off most splendidly. As always, you are a bubbling fount of words and I remain forever in awe at the sheer descriptiveness of your letter. And what a letter it is; written on a torn piece of yellowing scrap paper, tied hastily on the leg of a bedraggled Raven with a piece of broken, dirty twine. It is the most perfect present a sister could receive from her brother after being kept in the dark for a year whilst he runs off into the wilderness on a suicidal mission to slay a

dragon. To make matters even better, this very same brother ran off with his sister's two precious boys who, despite what they say, are entirely too young to be partaking in the same level of madness as their uncle.

It also relieves my heart to know that my children are 'doing well', with no further details regarding the injuries they have suffered, the experiences they have endured, how much they have grown…nope! Any mother who hasn't seen her young boys for a year would be perfectly content with knowing that they are 'doing well', because those two words are more than enough to comfort her. So I thank you, dear sweet brother, for such a helpful, beautifully written letter that will, no doubt, put all future letters to shame.

On a separate note, I am glad that you are alive, brother, just so that I have the opportunity to kill you myself if the next letter you send me is as curt as this one. At the very least, send me a Raven who can talk in Common tongue if you are unable to write a proper letter.

Tread carefully. I will come find you if I have to. You will not like that.

By the way, I have fed the Raven and I am keeping him with me so that he may rest. He seemed less than eager to return to Erebor immediately, I can't imagine why. In return, I am sending my own. Treat her kindly.

Send my love to both of my sons. Why have they not written?

Your most gracious and loving sister,

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

From Erebor, 2941.

To my sweet and forgiving sister Dís,

I was lying on a cot recovering from grievous battle injuries when I wrote that letter and even then I thought of you. Have a heart!

I spent the last year on the road, getting attacked by all manners of creatures while trying to lead my men to safety and save them from starvation. I had to endure the company of Elves, twice! Both of which were against my will, might I add!

And if that wasn't enough, I was put in a barrel to escape from imprisonment. A barrel that was subsequently rolled into a river.

As you can no doubt imagine, it is rather hard to send a message under these difficult conditions. Do not think that my silence is out of malicious intent.

I would also like to remind you that you were on board with my plan to reclaim Erebor. It was you who funded most of the expedition from the profit of your "business" (and no, I do not approve of this "business." I still don't). You were also the one who decided to surrender Fíli and Kíli to me after being subjected to two weeks of their incessant begging. I believe at the time, you have told me to, and I quote: "Take these demonic hellions out of my sight or so help me, Mahal!" And I gladly obliged.

Your children are whole and hale except for a few minor cuts and bruises. They have shown great bravery and have become fine warriors. Father and Grandfather would have been proud. Other than that, you would be pleased to know that Fíli and Kíli remain virtually unchanged in their personalities. Their spirits have not wavered throughout the journey and I am sad to say that they are still as mischievous as before.

The journey has been trying but we have succeeded. I shall try to be brief to recount the final moments that led up to our victory. The dragon is dead; it was felled by Bard of Esgaroth, an heir to Girion of Dale, when it attacked the town. With Esgaroth destroyed, its inhabitants and their Elven hosts set their sight on Erebor's treasure to pay for their damages. However, they had not expected to see my Company and me, for we had stolen into the fortress long before they could reach us, and had erected a barricade along the South Gates to keep the intruders at bay. We were at an impasse – I did not see any reason to strike a deal with them and they did not wish to leave with nothing. My friend Master Baggins, a Hobbit-Burglar we had hired at Gandalf's insistence, tried to prevent the situation from escalating but I am ashamed to admit that I did not see the wisdom of his actions. In my rashness, I had cast him away and for that, I regret deeply. Meanwhile, Dain had answered my call for help to defend our fortress. The Dwarven army from the Iron Mountain arrived in time to face not the armies of Men and Elves like they were expecting, but a surprise attack launched by the Orcs and Goblins from Mount Gundabad instead. We found ourselves unwilling allies with the very same Elves and Men whom we considered as threats just moments ago, but together, we successfully defeated our enemies.

Erebor is our home once again, but it will be a long while before we can truly celebrate, not when we are still reminded of our heavy losses from the dead strewn around our doorstep.

What about you, dear sister? I hope you bring happier news from the Blue Mountains and that you are satisfied by the adequate wordiness of this letter.

I have taken care of your Raven, as you said, though I suspect you have been overfeeding her. I'm fairly sure a bird is not supposed to be this rotund. As for the reason to why I have written in the first place, I'm afraid we are a bit short on Ravens who can speak Common tongue at the moment. The years have not been kind to them and their numbers have dwindled significantly. The ones who remain are helping us with our effort to rebuild Erebor. For now, I hope you will not mind dealing with a regular, non-speaking, note-carrying Raven instead.

- Thorin

Hello Mother,

This is Fíli, writing in for both Kíli and I. (*Hello Mum! It's Kíli!*) How are you doing back in the Blue Mountains? How's your business running? I hope you haven't had any issues with drought or anything that could have caused your crops to fail and I hope you are well and healthy!

We're both doing fine by the way, so don't you worry about us! In case if Uncle did not tell you this yet, we've reclaimed Erebor and we got to fight in an actual battle, with an actual army, against an actual army of Orcs! They were ugly, terrifying looking creatures… not to say that I was terrified or anything, though Kíli was probably ~~quaking in his boots~~ (*valiantly saving his dumb brother from being skewered to death by a spear!)* Stop being a menace, Kíli! This is my letter and I get to write it how I want! (*You just said that you were writing in for the both of us, ~~you dolt!~~ That means I get to have my say in here too!)* Well I'm writing the majority of it so you don't get to call me a dolt. Besides, you're the nincompoop.

As I was saying, the Orcs were terrifying looking with their bone and metal armor. They came at us in waves and waves, crashing in around us from all sides until it felt like we were being suffocated. They also had this massive cloud of swirling bats covering them, which casted a dark shade over the entire length of the battle field. It was all very dramatic, but nothing could beat Uncle Thorin's entrance to the battle! He barged through the barricades, ones that we built earlier on to secure the South Gates, and in the most majestic fashion, he fearlessly charged at his foes with his blade swinging. Slowly, Uncle carved his way forward, slaying any Orcs and Goblins that dared to cross his paths and I was right there beside him with the Company. I took out 50 Orcs! (*No you didn't! It was more like 43. I took out 60 with my bow and arrows.*) That's a lie! You don't have enough space in your quiver to hold 60 arrows! (*Well I reused some! Just because you didn't see me doesn't mean it's not true!)*

Anyway, we thought that we were in trouble when we found ourselves utterly surrounded, but just then, Beorn (*he's a shapeshifter who could turn himself in a great bear! We met him on our journey*) crashed into the fray, taking down dozens of enemies with great big swipes of his paw. The great Eagles also came swooping down from the sky to scatter the rest of our foes.

We won, Mum! *(Everyone in the company is relatively healthy as well! ~~Fíli here has his ribs smashed in and this great big gash and I have a broken arm)~~* we both have cuts and bruises only, Mum! Nothing to worry about! We're right as rain! ~~Please don't hurt Uncle!~~ Uncle is doing alright as well but he had to be bedridden for a bit. Bilbo, our Burglar-Hobbit (*or is it Hobbit-Burglar, which way is which?)* Does it matter? Master Bilbo Baggins has proven himself to be a wonderful helper to the healers. He's been taking care of Uncle and us since we came back from the battle. *(Not that we need to be taken care of or anything since we only have cuts and bruises. Nothing more grievous than that so don't you worry, Mum!)* Master Baggins is really good at convincing Uncle to rest in bed. I don't think I have ever seen Uncle this docile. It's eerie.

I wish you could meet him, Mum! I think you would like him just fine. He's small, soft and skittish like a little door mouse, but he's very clever and he can also be very protective – (*like that time he jumped in front of that large pale Orc to save Uncle's life! And Uncle swept him up in this great big hug! Bilbo made the most adorable squeaking noise. Oh, and he can turn invisible too!)*

I also wish you had seen us in battle! Even Dwalin looked impressed – (*and you know he's impressed when he has that funny expression on his face, the one where his mouth is all pinched up like he's eaten a sour crab apple and his brows furrow a little, but his eyes are shining!)* You make him sound like he's constipated… but I guess what Kíli said is true enough. And then, he gave us both this heavy pat on our shoulders so we must have done really well to deserve that.

We'll write more later! Our healer is giving us the stink-eye so we have to go now! Take care! (*Bye Mum!!)*

Your loving sons,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 6 Dec., 2941.

To my two troublesome sons who will no doubt send their poor mother to an early grave,

How are your injuries and tell me the truth! Don't think that you are protecting your uncle by lying to me. If anything, this will only make me angrier towards all of you when I find out later and believe me, I WILL find out. I can't believe you both had the audacity to try to pull the wool over your own mother's eyes, especially when I worked so hard to take care of you, clothe you, and feed you! Is this is how you decide to pay me back for the years of nurturing? With heartbreak and deceit?

You are lucky that your dear father cannot see us now. What would he think if he learned that his own sons are mistreating their poor mother like that? He is probably rolling in his grave!

Now that I have made my point extremely clear, I want to know <u>everything</u> about this Bilbo Baggins. How did you meet him? What was your initial impression of him? What great offense did your uncle commit towards the poor Hobbit? (Yes, your uncle mentioned that in brief… something about casting him away and regretting it afterwards?) What is his current relationship with your uncle? I also want a picture of the Hobbit. Please arrange this with young Master Ori and I shall consider not giving you both the ear pinching of your lives when I see you.

I am very glad to hear that you are both all right and that you have acted so bravely in battle. It doesn't matter how many Orcs you each killed. What matters to me is that you protected each other and your uncle when he needed you the most. Your uncle might not say it to you, but he is very, very proud of you, as am I. (Don't tell him I told you though! It would embarrass him to no end and you will have to bear the brunt of his temper.)

Now that your adventure has drawn to an end, I hope you will listen to the healers and rest. Don't make your poor mother worry anymore! You know I am getting too old for this.

To my oldest: Watch over your younger brother! I am depending on you to be the sensible, responsible one.

To my younger: Always keep your eyes sharp and your ears keen. I expect you to work with your brother to keep out of trouble!

Valar forbid that I hear you two end up in a ridiculous situation, like being roasted alive on a spit by a group of ravenous trolls!

The business is going well, by the way. I have recently expanded our operations to areas east past Bree. At this rate, I expect the inns in and around this area to be stocked with our products come spring time. Of course, I will have to hire more men to help transport everything safely and swiftly, but that shouldn't present too much of a problem, not with the profit we have been raking in. What can I say? The Men and Dwarves of the region have excellent taste in alcohol, unlike those pretentious Elves who only like their red wines.

I expect to hear good things in the next letter! Take care of yourselves!

With lots of love,

Your mother

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

To my lying liar of a brother who has a death wish,

Cuts. And. Bruises.

Did you honestly believe that you could get away with lying to old Dís about her children's injuries?

Words cannot express how LUCKY you are that everything turned out for the best. Otherwise, no forest, valley or mountain range would be enough to stop me from getting to Erebor to HURT you. I would not hesitate to make it a slow and unimaginably painful experience, one that would haunt your every waking nightmare and make you quake at the very sight of me.

How severely are you hurt? Don't you dare feed me that line about 'cuts and bruises' like you did with Fíli and Kíli's injuries either! And just for lying, you are not getting an ounce of sympathy from me. I hope that barrel experience was as uncomfortable and humiliating as humanly possible, or at the very least, more humiliating than that time with the horse on your 60th birthday. You know the one.

I suppose I should offer my (grudging!) congratulations as well for securing our ancestral home. You did good, for a stupid, stubborn, lying old Dwarf. ~~I was really worried, you know. Don't you dare die on me now that you've reclaimed the mountain.~~ Let me know when you will need any supplies and I shall arrange it for you immediately. At the earliest, I can have your items delivered to Erebor in two months, but I will need to coordinate the activities from all of my lookout posts and pool all of my resources from my operations to get this done. You can thank my extremely lucrative business for such an efficient delivery system, you judgemental ass.

As for the Blue Mountain, everything is fine here. The Dwarves have not stopped celebrating ever since I announced the good news. Everyone is excited by the prospect of returning home again so if you need more helping hands, you have

got a group of workers willing to travel to Erebor as soon as possible.

Also, you can start by making up to me for lying by telling me more about this interesting "Master Bilbo Baggins" of yours. From what I heard, he's an adorable, clever little thing with the penchant for turning invisible, was it? Has he been hovering by your side, fretting over your health and offering you tender loving care ~~even after you have apparently treated him most harshly too~~? I would love to hear more about this mysterious fellow.

You owe me, now start talking!

Your loving sister (even though you sure don't deserve it!)

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

PS. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Hildr! It is your own Ravens who are underweight, those poor, poor creatures.

PPS. Gimli sends his love to his father.

Thorin sighed wearily as he rubbed his tired eyes from staring so long at his sister's newest letter. He was supposed to be sleeping after having taken his medication for the pain from his battle wounds, but he had already spent the entirety of last week confined to his bed and he was pretty sure that this utter lack of movement was making him a bit stir-crazy. He picked up the heavy, cream-coloured parchment – typical for Dís to use such fancy stationary – and squinted at his sister's tiny, neat runes, trying to concentrate for the fifth time this evening. It was extremely hard to make out her words in the dark of the tent, lit with the few stray candles that they could spare, and Thorin automatically shifted closer to the flickering light on his bedside table. The dull flare of pain radiating from his abdomen stopped him abruptly.

Closing his eyes, the Dwarven king placed the letter over his lap and fought to keep his frustration at bay; he hated feeling so terribly useless. There he was, trapped in a cocoon of blanket with barely enough strength to sit up and do paper work while the rest of his people were out there, scrambling to recover the dead and tend to the wounded. There was so much that needed to be done, including but not limited to securing fresh supplies to restock their rapidly dwindling ones and setting up an official meeting with the Men and Elves to discuss the details of a truce. According to the reports from his company, a fragile peace has settled over the battleground thus far and Thorin hoped to find ways to maintain it. The Dwarves could not risk the situation becoming volatile, not when they were still so vulnerable.

"What are you still doing up so late? You should be resting, Thorin," a soft voice asked next to him, and Thorin relaxed further into the pile of rolled up fur that the healers had placed behind him. He could easily recognize his visitor from his delicate accent and the lilt in the way he spoke Adûni.

"I should be asking you the same, Master Baggins." He opened one eye to peek lazily at the small Hobbit by his bed. Bilbo was peering up at him curiously, his hands holding up a wooden tray with a small metal pot and two, clean empty mugs. A thin, pale wisp of steam was rising from the pot's spout, filling the air with the rich earthy scent of tea. "I can't sleep," Thorin admitted wearily and he wasn't sure what it was about the Hobbit that made him willingly share these snippets of truth, "not when there is so much I could be doing."

"Maybe, I can keep you company for a little while then, if it is all right with you?" Bilbo shuffled unconsciously, a nervous habit the Hobbit would adopt whenever faced with an uncomfortable situation. Thorin had not seen Bilbo like this in his presence since the first few months of their travel and to see it again after so long shot a sharp pang of regret through the Dwarven king's heart.

And honestly, why should he be surprised? Their argument at the gate had never been resolved. Instead, Thorin and Bilbo had spent the past week hovering in limbo, finding it entirely too easy to ignore the hurt feelings between them when Erebor lay in tatters in front of them.

Like leaving an untended wound to fester, Thorin thought to himself grimly.

Maybe the Dwarf could finally take this opportunity to extend the olive branch.

Thorin tilted his head and offered the Hobbit a small, encouraging smile. He hoped that it would be enough to quell Bilbo's nervousness. "I would be delighted, Master Baggins."

The Dwarf watched Bilbo deposit the tray on the table and carefully serve the tea. "I was making my rounds to check on Fíli and Kíli and I thought they would appreciate some tea," Bilbo confessed quietly after handing a steaming mug to Thorin. "Imagine my surprise to see them asleep for once, especially since they made such a fuss about staying awake to finish that letter of theirs."

Thorin laughed lightly and took a tentative sip of his tea. Finding it too hot for his liking, he placed his mug on the table to cool. "Their mother has been extremely vocal about us writing to her. Dís was not pleased by our year of silence."

She was not pleased by his white lie to her about her children's injuries either, though in retrospect, he really should have known better. Still, it was hard to push aside his ingrained instinct to look after his little sister, and at the end of the day, Thorin did not regret his actions.

Even if it meant that he had to work hard to crawl back into her good graces again.

He winced slightly at the unpleasant thought, a movement that Bilbo caught immediately.

"Oh, are you all right? Where are you hurting?" the Hobbit said, alarmed, instinctively putting his mug on the ground and rushing to the Dwarf's side. Surprised, Thorin could only stare as Bilbo ran his hand over his shoulders, arms and chest, methodically checking over the bandages without any lingering traces of the nervousness from before.

Thorin swallowed a heavy lump in his throat. Even after the way he had treated the Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins continued to rush to his aid without a moment of hesitation.

He was a colossal fool and he owed it to Bilbo to make things better between them.

"I'm going to pull back the covers and check your stomach. Let me know if it anything hurts." Bilbo said sternly, eyes focused on his task and at the Dwarf's wordless nod, the Hobbit peeled back the blankets.

Thorin tried not to shiver at the initial fleeting touches below his pectorals. Bilbo's hands felt inexplicably cool through the layers of bandages, and Thorin was reminded of the age old idiom about people with cold hands and warm hearts. The Hobbit continued his inspection along the length of Thorin's torso, his palms tracing downwards towards his navel in one, tortuously slow, uninterrupted stroke. The Dwarven king felt his mouth go dry when Bilbo's fingers moved to his sides, his thumb brushing on a smooth patch of unbandaged skin above his hips in an almost caress.

Bilbo looked up with a soft, encouraging smile; from this angle. Thorin could not help but notice the expressiveness in the Hobbit's bright eyes and how they crinkled adorably whenever he was pleased. The candle light cast a soft, golden glow over the Hobbit's smooth, comely face, his rosy cheeks and his mop of short, russet curls.

"It looks like everything is in order." Bilbo continued to rub slow circles on the expanse of skin, mindful of the yellowing bruises. "Are you feeling all right? You're looking a bit flushed."

Thorin could only nod mutely. Bilbo frowned at the response and leaned closer, cupping the Dwarf's face in both of his small hands. "Look up please, but keep your head still," Bilbo ordered politely in a calm, quiet voice. Thorin dimly wondered what would happen if he reached over to smooth away the furrow between the Hobbit's brows.

"Good, now look down. Great. Look to your left, and then to your right." Should he be worried by this sudden growing urge to touch Bilbo Baggins?

The Hobbit released him and before Thorin could miss the warmth of his touch, Bilbo pressed the inside of his wrist over the Dwarf's forehead. "Hmm, you're feeling a little warm," the Hobbit continued, completely oblivious to Thorin's inner musing. "I will have to let the healers know to watch out for that."

Satisfied with that decision, Bilbo leaned back and gave a final nod of approval. He then arranged the covers so that they would fit neatly under Thorin's arms, and placed Dís letter, which had shifted away during the inspection, over the Dwarf's lap again.

"There, right as rain."

Thorin was bombarded by mental images of a pair of small, soft, *familiar* hands leaving lingering touches along warm skin and he was valiantly trying to *will them out of existence* before he embarrassed himself. It wasn't until Bilbo's shy smile completely slipped away that he realized, to his dismay, that he had been silently staring at the Hobbit for quite a long while.

People had told him in the past that his thinking face tended to look like he was glaring at them.

Bilbo apparently thought so as well.

The Hobbit cleared his throat uncomfortably, ducked his head down, and reached for his cooled tea. "I guess I should be going now," he mumbled into his cup. "It's getting late and you should be resting with that fever. I'm sorry for disturbing you for so long."

Thorin made a small, inaudible noise at the back of his throat in protest but remained frozen on his bed as he desperately scrambled his brain to try and fix this. His mind was drawing an embarrassing blank on how to stop the Hobbit from leaving aside from leaping out of the bed and tackling the Halfling to the ground. Meanwhile, Bilbo looked increasingly more uncomfortable at the prolonged silence, if not a little confused by Thorin's seemingly unresponsive state. Bilbo shifted in his place – Thorin felt that same guilty pang in his heart at the nervous gesture – and gave one last shaky smile before reaching quickly for the wooden tray. He looked ready to bolt out of the tent and Thorin *really, really needed to act now.*

Thorin bellowed out suddenly and violently, "I'M SORRY!!"

Bilbo recoiled from the table and jumped into the air, splashing tea all over himself and the ground.

"Um, I forgive you?" the Hobbit squeaked out. He was clutching his mug tightly against his chest like a shield, as if he could hide behind it to get away from any more crazy outbursts that were pelted at him. When he realized what Thorin

had said a second later, he blinked in confusion. “Wait, what?”

“I’m sorry,” Thorin repeated again, this time much more softly. His face was flushed bright red from mortification, but he might as well finish what he had started. Taking a deep breath to strengthen his resolve, he clarified, “I’m sorry for the words I spoke to you at the gate.”

He swallowed thickly, unsure how to put his tangled emotions and thoughts into something coherent, but he was determined to make his peace now that the floodgates have opened. “I have spent the past week thinking and it occurred to me that I have not been acting in the best interest of my people.” He looked away from the shocked Hobbit and stared resolutely at his lap, tightening his grip on the cover until his knuckles whitened. “I should not have cast you away like that when it was clear that from the beginning, you were trying to vie for peace.”

He shook his head, frustrated with himself, at his own stupidity, at the way that he had been so woefully blind before the battle. His people had depended on him and he should have put their needs above all else. Instead, he had easily succumbed to his dark greed and chose to jealously guard the treasure without casting a second thought for the rest of his company members. Thorin bent his head even further at the glum thought. Whether he liked it or not, the undeniable truth remained – he had failed miserably as a king at that critical moment.

“It is not worth risking a war for the treasure, especially when there is so few of us left already. The destruction from our battle against the Orcs has reminded me of that.” He smiled bitterly to himself. And it only took the near destruction of everything he held dear to cleanse him of the gold madness. “Perhaps if more of us could value food and cheer above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.”

A chilled hand settled over Thorin’s and the Dwarf looked up, surprised to see that Bilbo had moved this close by his side. The Hobbit was gazing at him with such tenderness that Thorin felt his breath knock from his lungs. “Thank you, Thorin. It is not in the nature for us Hobbits to bear grudges so I’ve long since considered this to be water under the bridge.” Bilbo ducked his head before he continued contritely. “Besides, it is I who owe you an apology. I hid the Arkenstone away even when I knew how important it was to you. Will you forgive me for that?”

Thorin turned his hand so that Bilbo’s smaller one was cradled in his instead. “It is all water under the bridge, Bilbo,” he repeated back just as gently, but a great feeling of relief settled over his heart. For the first time, Thorin finally believed that the worst was behind them, like seeing the sun break through the clouds after being trapped in a long tumultuous storm.

He squeezed the Hobbit’s fingers lightly and returned the Hobbit’s shy smile.

They spent the rest of evening idly sipping their tea, filling the silence with stories about Bilbo’s thieving relatives and Thorin’s strong-willed sister. Neither of them commented when they did not let go of each other’s hands.

II. Ori

“All we’re saying is that we’d be very, very, very thankful if you can whip up a nice sketch of Master Baggins in say – ”

“One day.”

“Yes, one day, if not less. And you must be discreet about it!”

Ori looked confusedly between Fíli and Kíli. Why on Middle-Earth were they that desperate for a drawing of their Hobbit companion? The two Dwarves had ambushed him on his way to delivering some fresh parchment to Balin’s tent and had forcefully dragged him back to their healing tent before he could even protest. The two had then launched into a long, nonsensical spiel about ‘ear pinching’, ‘heartbreak and deceit’, ‘roasting pits’, and oddly enough, Lady Dís. How these topics had anything to do with their request for Bilbo Baggins’s portrait was beyond him, but Ori’s eyes had glazed over half an hour into their rant.

The young scribe could feel sweat beading on his forehead from Fíli and Kíli’s attention, and he licked his lips nervously. Frankly, their wide-eyed look of thinly veiled fear was making him extremely nervous and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to be involved in whatever scheme they had gotten themselves into.

“I’m not sure if I want to be a part of any – ” he glanced around him quickly before lowering his voice to whisper conspiratorially, “ – trouble! Now if you will excuse me, I am supposed to be delivering these to Balin!” He shook his stack of parchment for emphasis.

Fíli and Kíli ignored him and advanced menacingly.

“Wait, what are you doing? St-stop it!” Ori backed away slowly; he yelped when the back of his knee hit the cot and he went sprawling on the bed on his back, scattering the sheets of parchment around him.

“I don’t think you quite understand the severity of our problem,” Kíli said, voice lowered and eyes locked intensely on Ori. The younger Dwarf swallowed visibly from the bed and backpedalled until his back hit the canvas of the tent.

Fíli stepped away from his brother’s side and without breaking eye contact with the poor scribe, he got on the bed and crawled towards Ori. “You see, if we don’t have that sketch soon…well, let’s just say it will be *most* inconvenient.”

“And you wouldn’t want that to happen now, would you?” Kíli joined his brother on the bed. If Ori wasn’t feeling extremely intimidated, he would have wondered how someone with a broken left arm could move that fluidly on all four.

“We know you don’t, Ori.” Oh Mahal, they had him sandwiched between them. Ori scrunched his eyes closed, but the Dwarves only pressed closer against him on each side. To his right, Fíli leaned in to card his fingers through his hair. Ori jerked away only to bump into Kíli, who ran a tantalizing hand down the scribe’s left arm.

“Nice Ori, sweet Ori,” Kíli whispered into his ear and Ori tried not to whimper.

“Oh for the love of – boys! Get your hands off the poor Dwarf and get over here. It’s time for your medicine!” Óin clucked loudly from the tent’s entrance. Without waiting for a response, he walked in, arms laden with bottles.

“Leave it to Óin to ruin all our fun,” Fíli grumbled beneath his breath and Ori breathed a sigh of relief. When he gingerly opened his eyes, both brothers had already moved back so that they were facing him.

“So will you help us out, pretty please? For Lady Dís?” Kíli asked in a whining tone, the dark huskiness that was present a minute ago having disappeared entirely from his voice. The two brothers turned large, pleading eyes on Ori and the young Dwarf felt himself capitulate.

“Fine, fine!” Ori sighed, feeling annoyed with himself. One of these days, he would learn how to say no. “But there is no way that I can have this done in a day. I will try my best to get this to you as soon as I – ack!”

Kíli and Fíli had launched themselves at him, spewing a litany of thank yous. Ori sighed again and sat back, resigned to being crushed in a three-way hug.

He would have to figure out an excuse to get Bilbo to agree to the sketch since apparently, he wasn’t supposed to let him know that Lady Dís was behind this. He supposed he should get started immediately.

After he had picked up all the parchment sheets he had dropped, of course.

A full week had passed before Ori had the courage to approach Bilbo, and if the Hobbit was annoyed at being interrupted on his way to Thorin’s tent, he did not show it.

“I would be honoured to pose for your sketch,” Bilbo answered pleasantly enough. He hefted the small, wooden crate in his arm closer to his chest. “When do you want to start and what would I need to do?”

“Um, as soon as possible, if you don’t mind. I have everything I need already,” Ori replied brightly, feeling very much relieved that Bilbo had not found his request odd. Then again, it was not a secret that the young Dwarf was documenting their adventure to Erebor, so it would be natural to assume that Ori was compiling personal information on the members of Thorin’s company as well. The Dwarf adjusted the strap of his bag across his shoulder. “I will need an hour of your time where you can be relatively still.”

“Oh, I have the time right now! I only have to drop this off and I am done for the day. If you’re not too busy, you can come along. It shouldn’t take me too long.”

Ori and Bilbo spent the rest of their walk exchanging pleasantries about their day. They had just reached Thorin’s tent when they were interrupted by a sudden, loud, resounding crash. Pale-faced and wide-eyed, Bilbo immediately bolted through the entrance. The Dwarf followed a second after.

“And what, pray tell, were you planning on doing?” Ori was taken aback by Bilbo’s deeply annoyed tone before catching the sight in front of him.

Their majestic king was lying face first on the ground in a tangled heap of armour, fur pelts, and the blanket from his cot. His hair was mussed spectacularly, and at the sound of Bilbo’s voice, he raised his head to glare blearily back up at them. The chair beside him was knocked on its side.

Ori tried and failed horribly not to gape at Thorin.

“I wanted some fresh air,” said the king rather mulishly. The rasp in his voice did not make him come off as any less stubborn. When Bilbo did not let up his glare of disapproval, Thorin pressed his lips in a thin line.

“You wanted some fresh air,” Bilbo deadpanned. Ori backed away slowly from the two, his self-preservation instincts kicking into high gear. “Right. Off with those clothes and back into bed with you.”

Bilbo bent down to place the crate he was holding on the floor beside him and strode smoothly over to the king. Before Thorin could squawk in indignation, the Hobbit had boldly wrapped his arms around the Dwarf, *plucked* him from the mess on the ground, and forcefully guided him backwards until he was on the bed again.

Ori felt that Thorin's look of surprised outrage was rather appropriate given that the much stronger Dwarf had just been manhandled by a very small Hobbit.

Bilbo was not done, however. "I can't believe you were planning to have a nice stroll outside when you can barely even walk," he continued to grumble unhappily while deft hands quickly moved to unbuckle the armour with unexpected familiarity and ease. "Hands up," he ordered and to Ori's increasing surprise, the Dwarf *obeyed* although he rolled his eyes first.

"Oh by all means, do make yourself at home. It's not as if you haven't made yourself familiar with everything else already," growled Thorin when Bilbo had to get on the bed to pull the last piece of clothing over the Dwarf's head. Bilbo shot him a look of such hurt that Thorin looked away, snapping his mouth shut.

Wait a minute, just what had Thorin meant by *that* and since when had Bilbo become so adept at removing the king's clothes?! Ori felt his mind fill with explanations and scenarios and he most definitely did not want to visit *any* of them, no thank you.

Bilbo sighed and got off the bed once the shirt was removed and he had checked over the Dwarf's injuries. "I know you don't like being stuck in here. I thought I'd bring something to cheer you up."

The Hobbit thanked Ori when the young scribe silently handed him the blanket from the floor. He shook it out a few times to get rid of the dust and draped it carefully over Thorin's legs in a practiced move.

Thorin, however, did not pay Bilbo's coddling any mind. He tilted his head inquisitively. "You brought me something?"

"Yes, it's in that crate. Ori could you fetch it – oh, thank you!" Bilbo plonked the box by the bed side, pried it open, and reached in to grab several wrapped packets and a corked bottle.

"I got you these. I thought you'd appreciate it after two weeks of nothing but bland porridge." Amused, Bilbo quirked his lips and handed the contents for Thorin.

"You got me… food. Actual, real, food." Thorin sounded awed. "Is that smoked meat?" Without waiting for an answer, the Dwarven king tore into the package and proceeded to stuff his mouth full with a level of desperation reserved for the starving.

"Oh dear sweet merciful Mahal, it is!"

"You're welcome," Bilbo drawled, amused. "I also pilfered some baked goods from the kitchen. That's the other package. Feel free to wash it all down with whatever's in that bottle."

Thorin picked up the bottle without looking at the label, uncorked it with his teeth, spat out the cork, and guzzled down the liquid in abandon. "I don't know what this is except that it's strong," the Dwarf said appreciatively after downing about half the bottle. He grimaced as the alcohol burned the back of his throat, "Where did you get this?"

Bilbo shrugged. "I got it off of Nori. Didn't ask any questions."

"I never thought I'd say this, but Bilbo Baggins, you are a terrible influence. Come over here."

From his bed, Thorin placed the bottle back in the crate and pulled Bilbo down in a full body hug that the Hobbit happily returned. The affection they shared for each other had never been more apparent.

Ori stood shock still, watching from his corner. He watched some more when it was clear that the two were not going to let go of each other any time soon.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity later, the Dwarf pulled back enough to press his forehead against the Hobbit's. "Thank you, Bilbo," Thorin said, thick with emotion and oh no, they looked like they were ready to hug each other again.

"Excuse me, Master Baggins," Ori interrupted, feeling a bit put off at being forgotten judging by the identical looks of surprise he received. "Maybe I can get that sketch at another time, whenever it's convenient?"

Preferably somewhere away where he would not witness any more longing looks and lingering touches.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry Ori! I'll be right with you!" Bilbo flushed in embarrassment but broke away from the bedside.

"I'll just wait for you outside then, if that's alright with you?" With a nod at both the Hobbit and the king, Ori walked determinately out of the tent, pretending not to see Bilbo bending down to whisper something in Thorin's ear that made the king give a low, deep, rumbling chuckle.

That was entirely too much public display of affection that he was comfortable with seeing.

"Here's your portrait, now for the love of Mahal, don't send me back in there again!"

Ori pushed the drawing to Fíli's chest and stomped off, face bright red.

Kíli stared at Ori's retreating back and turned to his older brother. "What was that all about?"

Notes:

A/N:
I'm back with a shiny new fic. Hi! Hopefully, you won't be sick of seeing this ugly mug!

Right, a little forewarning: if you're looking for an epic, plot-heavy, angst-filled piece like After the Dust Settles… then be prepared to be disappointed because this ain't it. Run for the hills while you still can! This is something I wrote on a whim mainly because I want to see: a) Bilbo grope Thorin, b) Bilbo and Thorin share an epic bromance that turned into some sort of romance, and c) everyone feel really awkward about the PDA. I feel like I should feel a smidgen of shame. HA!

Hope you guys will stick around for some more!

Notes about this chapter!

[1] I don't think Tolkien ever made it clear if the other Dwarves (aside from Thorin) could understand Raven speak. I'm going to assume that only the heirs to the throne are taught this (which meant that Dís is sadly excluded). She will have to resort to note carrying birds to get her messages to and from Erebor.

[2] Dís' business will be explained more in detail, especially why Thorin does not support it. Also, Dís, like a lot of mothers, have learned early on the art of using guilt trip to get what she wants. Watch her wield it expertly to make her sons and brother cower before her! (She's also using it to dig up more dirt on Bilbo Baggins.)

[3] Fun fact - Westron is the English translation of "Adûni", which was the actual name for the common speech that was spoken.

[4] "If more of us could value food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world." These were the last words spoken by Thorin in canon. I thought it was fitting to slip that in here. How many of you recognized it? :D

[5] There we have it – the first two people to clue in to Thorin and Bilbo's relationship: Dís and Ori. This list will quickly spread. Heh.

Chapter 2 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1313485)

Notes:

Thank you so much for your patience, guys. The response I got back is ridiculous. Hope you guys will enjoy Chapter 2! As usual, review/kudos if you want to see more, thanks!

Feel free to comment/ask questions over at my tumblr: bgtea.tumblr.com

Betaed by ArielT. She does amazing work. :D

I decided to post this link up here instead. If you haven't seen this youtube video, you should. 'The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins' http://youtu.be/AGF5ROpjRAU. You're welcome.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_2_endnotes) .)

III. Dwalin and Balin

Erebor, 2941.

To my extremely nosy and infuriating sister Dís,

Fíli and Kíli may have suffered injuries slightly more grievous than cuts and bruises, but they are most definitely on their way to a full recovery, judging by how much grumbling I have been subjected to by their healers. I shall leave the whining to them as I am sure that they are bored and have much to say about the different things that are making them unhappy. I am certain that you would derive nothing but pure enjoyment from the descriptiveness of their letters, especially when they will undoubtedly tell you everything in excruciatingly long, drawn-out detail – enough to fill a novella! Fíli and Kíli are wonderfully verbose like that.

Meanwhile, their poor uncle is recovering and it's just an absolute crying shame that he must be left to relax in wonderful, blessed, peaceful tranquility. However, he is certain that their mother is more than happy to entertain her children.

You're very welcome.

I am doing fine, by the way. Most of the damage is to my abdomen but I am in a much better shape now. Bilbo helped. I quite enjoy his company, especially his talent for smuggling food to me and his ability to carry on interesting conversations without resorting to asking deeply invasive and probing questions, unlike some other Dwarf I know.

And since you asked so nicely, the argument we had right before the battle was over the treasure. Bard of Esgaroth was demanding a share of it so that he could rebuild Dale and Lake-town. He claimed that he had aided our quest by slaying the dragon and that a portion of the treasure was stolen from Dale by Smaug to begin with. Bilbo wanted me to parlay with Bard while I refused and the Hobbit took matters into his own hands in an attempt to diffuse a potential war from starting. I…did not react with the most grace. We have reconciled our differences and I am glad to see our friendship rekindled. I would hate to have left things unresolved between us.

I had a brief meeting with Bard and that tree-shagging sod Thranduil. We signed a peace treaty and I agreed to pay the bowman the sum he had requested. There will be another meeting between myself and the Men to discuss future trade especially regarding food. At the moment, we are obtaining our supplies from Dain, but this arrangement is a temporary one at best. The sooner the valley is tilled, the better the chances are for Erebor's longevity.

I have included a detailed list of the items and workers we need in the order of importance. Please make the necessary arrangements.

- Thorin

PS. I hope your curiosity has been satisfied though if not, I have no doubt that you will take matters into your own hands. Try not to be too harsh with Fíli and Kíli. I still need my heirs sane and relatively free from emotional scars. Also, Glóin sends his love to his son and his wife.

PPS. I thought we agreed to never talk about my 60th birthday. Ever. In return, I won't bring up your 72nd birthday, the one with the cow and that poor naked Dwarf.

Here was what Thorin did not tell his sister – the meeting went much better than he had anticipated, which translated to no acts of physical violence, no exchange of insults, and only barely suppressed looks of snide disgust. The latter was mostly shared between the Dwarf and the Elvenking while Bard the Grim kept looking, well, grim.

No one was more surprised by the civility than Thorin himself who had planned, in the event that an escape was needed, to lunge boldly across the table and bury his iron-tipped pen in Thranduil's smug face before running for the hills. Later on, the Dwarf would concede that the plan was not as well thought out as it could be. For one, he could not have reached Thranduil when sprawled on top of the table. The most he could have done in that position was to wave the pen threateningly under the Elvenking's nose. A second and much more noticeable flaw in his plan was that he could barely hobble to the meeting table without wincing at the dull, spreading ache from his wounds. He highly doubted that he could make the sprint towards Erebor's defensive walls in his current state, much to his disappointment.

Still, the thought of wielding a pen against the Elf – especially when he was searched for weapons three times before the meeting, *three times!* – was entertaining enough that Thorin found his spirits unexpectedly lifted for the duration of the peace talk.

It also helped that from Thranduil's sour disposition, it was clear that the Elf was even less thrilled to be there than he was and as a result, they were spared from making pretenses at pleasantries.

It's funny how quickly a meeting can progress when we don't have to be polite to each other, Thorin had thought bemusedly. It would be a very long time before the Dwarves could consider the Elves allies but Bard was more than willing to let past transgressions slide when Thorin not only agreed to pay the Men what was due, but also offered to help in transporting the treasure from Erebor's vaults.

And then the meeting was over and Thranduil swept away with his merry band of pretentious, weedy-looking, emotionless puppets.

Good riddance to them all, Thorin thought while he glared viciously at the Elvenking's retreating back. Let's hope that they won't be meeting sometime in the next century and if they do, it would still be a hundred years too soon.

On the bright side, securing the peace for the kingdom was no longer an issue. Moving on to the next problem on the agenda: finding a reliable food source, and more specifically, figuring out how and where to procure enough to support Erebor's future population.

In the privacy of his tent, Thorin put his head against his desk with a thud and allowed himself to groan miserably. Reports from Balin, Dori, and Dain's men about the current situation in Erebor littered the table and the floor in numerous unorganized piles. While most of them were reporting good news, none of them were particularly helpful in his search for a plausible solution to this food problem. He had been holed up inside for the better part of the day, keeping the same position at his desk while he trudged through some of the most boring material he had laid his eyes on. Groaning again,

Thorin swept the nearest report (*Soil Composition Assessment in the South-East Region of Erebor, Part 3/Section 2S7H89*) to the far corner of his desk in frustration, hitting a nearby candle and causing it to wobble precariously.

He really ought to be more careful. Although setting *Soil Composition Assessment Part 3/Section 2S7H89* ablaze would not deliver a crippling blow to Dwarven literature – and *dear Mahal*, even reading the title made him die a little on the *inside* – he was sitting among a pile of flammable reports in a very flammable tent.

"You really should be more careful with all this paper around open flame. It's a fire hazard waiting to happen."

Thorin whirled around from his seat, startled by Bilbo's presence behind him, and immediately regretted his hasty movement when a sharp pain flared from his torso, wringing a hiss from him. Grimacing, his hand automatically flew to cradle his wound.

"Confounded Hobbits with their light-footedness," he snapped, slapping away Bilbo's hands when the Hobbit rushed over to check on the injury. "How long have you been standing there, spying on me?"

Bilbo interrupted his inspection attempt to give the Dwarf an affronted look. "I haven't been spying on you," he replied indignantly, "I have been standing there for the last five minutes, trying to get your attention. It's not my fault you were too busy having a great sulk at your desk. Now hold still while I see if you have done any damage to yourself!" Bilbo lifted Thorin's shirt before the Dwarf could protest and pressed his fingers deftly against the bandages.

It occurred to Thorin that seeing Bilbo bent over and looking at his naked torso had become such a familiar sight that he no longer felt any sort of awkwardness.

He wasn't sure what to make of that.

"I brought you your meal, by the way," said Bilbo matter-of-factly, still miffed at Thorin's accusation. He paused in his inspection to wave distractedly at the tray of food that was placed neatly on the bedside table to Thorin's surprise. When did *that* get there? "According to Balin, you've been skipping your meals over paperwork and everybody was starting to worry. I wanted to make sure that you're still alive and kicking."

Thorin's expression softened and he gave the Hobbit an apologetic look once he straightened up. Perhaps he was acting a bit unreasonably. "Well Master Hobbit, do I look suitably alive to you?"

Bilbo sniffed. "I suppose," he said exasperatedly, but the roll of his eyes showed that he wasn't truly angry. "You're looking disgustingly healthy. It is unbelievable how quickly you Dwarves heal." He brought the tray of food over and forcefully placed it on a free patch of space on the desk in a not-so-subtle order to eat. Thorin's stomach gurgled at the delicious scent of meaty stew but he gave the Hobbit a half-hearted glare on principle. Bilbo blithely ignored him, choosing instead to turn away to pull a small stool beside the desk. Honestly, the amount of respect Thorin got in his own tent was appalling.

"What were you thinking that has gotten you so distracted?"

"Meeting," Thorin started between bites of his food, delighted by the chunks of meat and vegetables. It looked like he had finally been upgraded from porridge and broth. "Peace talk, escape plan, Thranduil," he spat out the Elvenking's name poisonously, "and Erebor's food condition."

Bilbo blinked. "Well, I don't think I'll be able to help you with much of what you just said." His eyes went to the discarded report, surprised to see its title written in Westron. "*Soil Composition Assessment*? Are you planning to set up a farm?"

Thorin grimaced at the thought. "It is not within the Dwarven culture to perform agricultural duties." How should he put this delicately for the garden-loving Hobbit?

"To be a food-grower is seen as an insult among the Dwarves. Not that there is anything wrong with food growing," he amended quickly at Bilbo's insulted look. "A respectable job for the Dwarves is traditionally seen as work that involves the mountain or located within it – "

"And food growing is neither of these." Bilbo nodded in understanding. Thorin tilted his head in acknowledgement and continued to eat, waiting for the Hobbit's insatiable curiosity to lead him to ask more questions. "Then how did the Dwarves normally get enough food to support themselves?"

"In the olden days, Dwarves depended on hunting and gathering for food, but as the population grew, trade took a central role instead." Thorin licked off the last of his stew off his spoon, surprised to see it gone so quickly. He had practically inhaled his meal but he was feeling much more relaxed now with a full stomach. It's a miracle what a little hot food could do to a person. He thanked Bilbo when the desk was cleared before continuing, "Dwarven kingdoms were always founded close by other settlements who were successful in agriculture. Dwarves will offer their wares – weaponry, armour, jewelry and other metal-based products – in return for food. Dale was Erebor's main food supplier."

"So with Dale and Lake-town decimated…"

"We find ourselves without our food source," Thorin finished grimly.

"What about the Elves? Did you think to…all right, never mind." Bilbo trailed off awkwardly at the Dwarf's flat, unimpressed glare. It was more than enough to convey exactly what he thought about Bilbo's suggestion.

The Hobbit changed the topic easily, “Should we be more careful about how we ration our food then?” His eyes widened in realization, “Oh no! I have been sneaking in so many extra servings of pies for Fíli and Kíli too! Oh dear me!”

Bilbo wringed his hands guiltily, looking at Thorin with large, sad eyes and the Dwarven king tried not to smile at his endearing reaction. Instead, he leaned over to place a comforting hand on Bilbo’s slight shoulder. “We have more than enough food from Dain at the moment and more is coming from the Iron Mountains. There is no need to fret just yet.” Wait a minute, since when did he consider any of Bilbo Baggins’s action to be *endearing*? Thorin cleared his throat and hastily let go, feeling a tad uncomfortable by his thought.

“There will be a meeting held between Dain, Bard and myself to discuss possible long-term solutions for our food situation,” he continued gruffly. He was also going to blatantly *ignore* the adorable look of relief on Bilbo’s face. “It will need to be implemented by this coming spring.”

“So what’s all this then?” Bilbo gestured at the stacks of reports on the ground. Thorin sighed.

“I was hoping that there is a quicker way to get food than to wait for the Men to finish tilling their lands and planting their crops. Unfortunately, I have been rather unsuccessful in that regard. Also, I find myself at a loss for what I can do to help the Men.” Thorin shrugged, looking a bit helpless. “I do not know much about growing crops.”

“Oh, well why didn’t you say so earlier? I can definitely help you with that.”

Thorin stared mutely at Bilbo, surprised by the Hobbit’s blithe offer. It did not even occur to the Dwarf to ask for help since he had never expected to receive any to begin with. Sure, he had advisors and servants that performed tasks for him, but Thorin knew they were honour bound to serve him. Only his family and a handful of childhood friends would have bothered to help Thorin the Dwarf rather than Thorin II, the King Under the Mountain.

He had learned that lesson well from his years of exile.

Bilbo Baggins was neither family nor a childhood friend. For all intent and purposes, he was an outsider who depended very little on Erebor’s success and yet here he was in Thorin’s tent, bringing him food, listening to him rant about his troubles, and freely offering to lend a helping hand without a second thought. Everything about this Hobbit confused the Dwarven king.

It suddenly dawned on Thorin that against all odds, this soft, gentle, bright, *brave* creature had managed to slip past his defenses and make himself unbearably important to the Dwarf.

I would rule Erebor happily as long as Bilbo Baggins stays.

The resounding truth in that single, shining strand of thought stunned Thorin, leaving him gaping rather stupidly at the Hobbit as he tried to process the layers of emotions that lay underneath. Bilbo, oblivious to the sheer disruptive effect he had on Thorin, gave the king a kind, lopsided grin.

“There’s a reason why my tomatoes won top prizes in the Shire for five years running, you know! I may not be much of a fighter, but I do know my plants and crops,” the Hobbit said rather cheekily and it would take a much stronger Dwarf than Thorin to stem the sudden flood of affection he felt towards Bilbo in that instant.

“It is very kind of you to offer your help and I will gladly accept, if it’s not too much trouble,” the Dwarven king replied gracefully, feeling humbled and a little overwhelmed. He had *a lot* to think about later.

Bilbo waved his thanks away with a bright smile. “None of that! It would be my pleasure. Now, where do you want me to start?”

“How about we start with an explanation of what was written in that?” Thorin grimaced and plucked *Soil Composition Assessment* by the corners of its pages in obvious distaste. Bilbo’s laughter at his expression was so filled with light-heartedness that the Dwarf could not find it in him to take any offense.

Hello Mother,

This is Fíli (*with Kíli*) writing again! We hope the winter month is treating you well in the Blue Mountains! Erebor is getting a bit nippy but the weather is nowhere near as wet as we’re used to. Aside from that, everyone is holding on and we’ve healed enough to be able to help out in the camp a little. (*Mostly, we’re sent between different camps to pass along messages or we sit in meetings with Uncle. It’s nothing rigorous. The healers are really strict with the bed rest… and with feeding us porridge. It’s horrible!)* If our resident Hobbit hasn’t been sneaking us some pie once in a while, Kíli and I might have had to resort to doing something drastic for some actual food. *(And we would not hesitate to resort to violence either! Nobody should be subjected to that much porridge! It is a cruel and unusual punishment.)*

Kíli and I are recovering just fine though we may have exaggerated (*just a tiny, tiny bit!*) how well we were doing right after the battle. I may or may not have hurt my ribs a little and Kíli sort of, kind of, has a slight…broken arm. Honestly, it’s not that big of deal. It’s hardly noticeable at all! (*It’s only my left arm, Mum! I can still swing a sword just fine with my right! Firing a bow takes a bit of creativity but with enough time, I can probably figure out how to go about it*

with one hand.) They already have an invention where you can fire with one hand. It's called a crossbow, you dolt. *(Oh. Alright then, change of plans. I will learn how to expertly fire a crossbow with one hand. You can help, Fíli!)* Don't worry Mum. I'm watching him so that he won't take out his own eye or something.

We've included Bilbo's portrait that Ori drew for us to this letter, in case if you haven't seen it already. I think we may have overdone it when we ~~begged, attempted to seduce,~~ politely asked Ori for the favour. *(I think he's avoiding us, Fíli. Should we go bother him until he stops?)* Why not? It will give us something to do. We can treat it like our little side project *(after I figure out how to fire a crossbow with one hand, of course.)* Of course. It's good to have priorities in life. Also, I want to see Uncle Thorin's face when you show him what you could do. He's been holed up in his tent like a weird hermit. That can't be healthy. (*Well, Bilbo's been feeding him so he should be doing all right. Bilbo's excellent at feeding people, especially since he feeds them pie instead of porridge.*)

We didn't forget about your questions from your last letter although we're a bit worried by your interest in Master Baggins. *(Please don't hurt him, Mum! He's small and relatively harmless!)* In summary, we met Master Baggins at the beginning of our quest when Gandalf introduced him as the fourteenth member of our company. (*He was hired to be our Burglar but he looked more like a soft, gentlehobbit than anything. We weren't sure why Gandalf picked him and Uncle was not impressed at all.*) Bilbo proved us wrong though. He showed us just how brave he was time and time again throughout our quest – he saved Uncle from Azog right after we traversed the Misty Mountains, he freed us from that sour-faced Thranduil's dungeon when we were caught by the Elves *(we were smuggled out in barrels!)* Once in Erebor, he played riddle games with the Dragon and he tried to stop the Men and Elves from laying siege on us. *(Bilbo gave the Arkenstone to the Men so that Uncle would be willing to trade it back with gold, which was what the Men had wanted to begin with. They needed the money to rebuild Dale and Lake-town. Uncle was livid and almost tossed Bilbo off the walls when the Hobbit confessed to his actions.)*

I thought that this was one of the bravest things Bilbo did in this entire quest, to be honest. It must have been hard to do what he thought was right even when he knew he was risking his relationship with the company and Uncle Thorin. If I were in his position however, I would not betray Uncle like that…but I owe my allegiance to my king like all Dwarves from Erebor. *(None of the Dwarves from the Company would have, I'd reckon. It takes a special kind of devotion to follow Uncle on this mission. It's pretty safe to say that this group of Dwarves are already very loyal to begin with. The idea that any of us would betray Uncle is rather unthinkable.)* I suppose. Bilbo isn't like us and he's under no obligation to follow Uncle to Hell and back. After all, it's not as if Uncle is Bilbo's king. At least our Hobbit did it to protect us so his intentions were good. *(I like Master Baggins. Maybe I don't completely understand the way Hobbits think, but he's got a good heart. That's something I can't say for a lot of people I've met.)*

Either way, things have never been better between our Hobbit and Uncle. They spend time together in Uncle's tent and it seems like they have forgiven each other. *(Did you notice how Master Baggins always leaves the tent with a smile?)* And how Uncle seems more relaxed after his visits? Yes, yes I do. I think half the camp has noticed, to be honest. *(It must be an odd sight to see Uncle not snarling for once…or frowning, or grimacing, or glaring.)* If that's the effect that our Burglar has on Uncle, I'm really glad that they are friends again.

So…what *are* you doing with all this information about Bilbo Baggins anyway?

Take care of yourself! *(Please stay safe!)*

Your loving sons,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 16 Dec., 2941.

PS: You are most definitely not old! Perish the thought, Mum! You will stay young and beautiful forever. Also, where ever did you get that silly, silly idea about us being roasted on a spit by Trolls? As if something that ludicrous could ever happen.

To my dear brother who knows me entirely too well,

I commend your piss poor attempt at being an ass in that last letter. However, your threats are ineffective and I am most definitely enjoying my sons' verbose nature, thank you very much. How else would I learn *so much* about the goings-ons of Erebor, like how you've been acting like a shut-in, refusing company except from your Mr. Bilbo Baggins? From what I gathered, he's the paragon of a doting partner. He provides for you by bringing you meals (no doubt sneaking a few of your favourites in there as well because he is considerate like that. Did he bring you smoked meat? I bet he brought you smoked meat), he checks up on you periodically to make sure that you're doing all right, and he watches the children. My own sons have already rained praises on him so I know that the latter is true.

I can see you spending your evenings alone with him, quietly chatting or reading over candlelight while sipping on chamomile tea (of all things) and it's all so horribly, horrifically domestic. I can't even begin to process. I am dying, Thorin, dying from mortification and laughter – mortification at how you, the great Thorin Oakenshield, Dwarven king of Erebor extraordinaire have turned into an *old ninny* and laughter because of…pretty much the same thing, actually.

And for the record, I am your sister; it is my job to be asking deeply invasive and probing questions, especially if they involve my brother's mysterious friend who has done such a thorough job of charming both my brother and my own children. Don't you dare deny it either! You are utterly, utterly charmed by him. I can see it in your curt, one-liner compliments: "My friend Master Baggins" and "I am glad to see our friendship rekindled," those are practically declarations of love by your standard!

On another note, what you have told me about him completely checked out with his neighbours as well. They described him as a kind, polite, intelligent gentlehobbit who was "perfectly respectable" up until he decided to join your company on that "mad adventure". Most of his relatives think highly of him with the exception of those who introduced themselves as "Sackville-Baggins", or something or other, but I wouldn't trust a word that they say. What an overly pretentious, miserable bunch. They were completely dismayed by the news that Bilbo Baggins was alive and had been in the process of auctioning his items off. Please let your Hobbit know that my men and I have removed them from his house (we also thoroughly enjoyed that experience). We have secured his belongings for him as well so there is zero pressure for Master Baggins to rush back to the Shire. His property will be well looked after.

When you told me that your Hobbit disagreed with you and tried to stop a war between the Dwarves, the Men and the Elves, I was not expecting him to force your hand by giving the Arkenstone away (yes, my sons told me all about that). How on Earth did he manage that? What a clever, clever creature. He has a bit of craftiness and steel in him after all! I must confess that I am much more impressed after hearing that. It's good to know that between him and you, one of you could actually think.

I don't think I need to tell you how stupid you were acting in that whole siege debacle. I quite imagine that you have it all figured out on your own already.

I have attached a list which details the type of cargo that will be sent first and their approximate date of arrival to Erebor. I am also preparing to dispatch the first group of workers in a month's time. They should reach you by spring.

Please keep me updated regarding your food situation. I'm no farmer but my business entails that I know something about growing wheat and barley. I also imagine that the Hobbit is quite adept at growing food as well, judging by all the lovely crops I have seen in the Shire. Please consult him if necessary.

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

PS. Weren't you the one who said that Fíli and Kíli needed to toughen up? Well, consider my hassling them a way to build their character. You will thank me in the future when you see your heirs impervious to threats, emotional blackmail, and guilt trips.

PPS. Fine! If you're going to make such a fuss about it, I suppose I shall let it go, although honestly? I had a *great* time with Teleporno. I can't remember why the cow was there but the look on father's face was priceless.

Erebor, 2941.

Dís,

What.

What were you doing in the Shire?

Why were you talking to Bilbo's neighbours…or better yet, why were you talking to his *family*?

How did you even find his family in the first place and what in Middle-Earth did you say to those people?!

Oh Mahal.

- Thorin

PS. Bilbo gives his thanks for securing his property and his items from those, "grubby, thieving, rat-faced, Sackville-Baggins". Also, he would like to know if your men emptied the pockets of one Lobellia Sackville-Baggins for any stolen silver spoons.

PPS. First off, 'Teleporno' was probably not even his real name. What kind of self respecting Dwarf would name their child Teleporno? Secondly, stop. Just stop. There are some things that I do not need (or want) to know. Your 'good time' with that Dwarf is one of them.

To my dear brother Thorin whose response I am relishing with glee,

I was promoting my new triple distilled spirit there so I decided to have a little chat with those lovely people from the Shire. Mostly, we talked about their town, their taste in food and drink, their history, and Bilbo Baggins. Don't worry, nobody died. All of them were more than happy to talk after witnessing my expert skills in giving those Sackville-Baggins the boot.

I also offered to buy Master Baggins' good neighbours a few rounds at the local tavern. That probably helped too.

I don't understand your disapproval (and believe me, I can feel it all the way here in the Blue Mountains. Wow.) We were not barbaric. We did, however, ask politely if Mrs. Sackville-Baggins' could empty her pockets just in case if she decided to swipe a few souvenirs. There may or may not have been some posturing involved. And some impressive knife sharpening skills were displayed. I'm pretty sure one of my men did this neat little trick with his harpoon.

Besides, it was a good thing we thought of that or else your Hobbit would be missing a good amount of his silverware. Please let him know that everything has been recovered.

My little adventure with the Hobbits went very well, by the way. They sure know how to make their moonshines (I definitely was not expecting the competition to be so tough), but my product did very well judging by the very enthusiastic feedback I received. I expect to see an increase in sales once the Green Dragon starts introducing my new line of spirits to their customers.

How are you doing with that food problem?

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

PS. Please tell Mr. Baggins that he is very welcome.

Erebor, 2941.

Dís,

It is rather sad that I was actually comforted by the words "don't worry, nobody died" in your previous letter. I am, however, not comforted by your obvious intent to misinterpret my words. When I said "My friend Master Baggins", I meant it just that. No, it was not a declaration of love or whatever twisted conclusion you have concocted in your terrifying mind. Please cease imposing your madness on myself or on Bilbo.

Especially on Bilbo.

(Although he would like to thank you profusely for saving his silver spoons and he regrets not seeing Mrs. Sackville-Baggins's face himself.)

As for my food problem, I took your advice and asked Bilbo to be my advisor so that he can provide his expertise in farm planning. I have a feeling that the Men will need as much help as they can in regards to this issue, especially when we need them to grow enough crops to feed themselves and the Dwarven population. Dain has also sent word of Erebor's recovery to the Eastern towns to encourage the merchants to travel near the Lonely Mountain again. Likewise, Bard has spread the message in the Southern and the Western regions. We expect to see the fruits of our labour once the cold has died down.

Meanwhile, we have successfully mapped out the areas in the fortress that are salvageable and those that needed reconstruction work. The good news is that Smaug ignored the rest of the mountain and was more than happy to stay in the Treasury. The majority of the damage resulted from the years of neglect, but even that was not as extensive as we had originally believed. It is a small blessing that the reconstruction work ahead will not be overwhelmingly difficult. We will be sending a team to inspect the mines tomorrow. Let's hope that our good luck will continue to hold.

- Thorin

PS. Now that we have reclaimed Erebor, I hope you realize that you do not need to keep your business going for the sake of coin. Is there any way I can convince you to stop gallivanting in the wilderness or keep away from suspicious, harpoon wielding ruffians? Instead, you can keep to our Blue Mountain fortress where it is nice and safe!

To my suspicious, overbearing brother Thorin,

No, I will most certainly not stop my business! It took me decades to build it from the ground up and I'll be damned if I let it go now, not when I just secured contracts from twenty new taverns and inns to stock my spirits. Your suggestion for me to keep to the Blue Mountain is absolutely ridiculous. What do you expect me to do there? Twiddle my thumbs while I

languish in boredom, getting fat and old and, Mahal forbid, *docile*? To Hell with that and to Hell with your suggestion! I have a business *empire* to run and I will not rest until all of Middle-Earth is conquered, one bottle at a time!

I will have you know that my workers have all been hand selected by me to ensure that they can do their job with maximum efficiency. All of them are hard-working, loyal, dependable, and very competent. They also depend on this business to feed their families and I will not be the one to put them out of their jobs.

Also, there is absolutely nothing wrong with Teleporno. He works part-time near the river as a fisherman so of course he'd know how to wield a harpoon. (And before you throw a fit – no, he is not the same Teleporno as the one from the cow and birthday incident. It is purely coincidental that the two share the same name!)

Speaking of my employees' excellent work, my farmers have been experimenting with different barley and wheat crops to test which ones give the highest yield in the Blue Mountain regions. I have included a selection of the seeds from the most successful crops in this letter as well as the instructions for planting them. Personally, I found them to make excellent emergency crops; they grow quickly and they are more resilient to the cold and drought than most of my other plants. Hopefully, they will also do well in Erebor. Please pass all of these to Master Baggins. I am confident that he will know what to do as opposed to you useless lot.

I can send more seeds over if the Men are interested.

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

PS. Willful blindness is a most unsavory habit that you have developed as of late. 'Just friends', indeed.

"How does she acquire so many Telepornos? It's not as if it is a common name in Middle-Earth either!"

Bilbo ignored Thorin. Instead, he was staring flabbergasted at the sheet of instructions and the packet of seeds in his hands.

"Thorin, what does your sister do exactly? I thought you said that the Dwarves are not food growers."

They were sitting in Thorin's tent, poring over the different progress reports about Erebor's construction projects like they had been doing for the past week. Candles were lit around the room to ward off the creeping darkness of the evening, filling the space with a soft warm glow. Bilbo found it all very cozy but then again, the sight of candlelight mixed with the scent of ink, parchment, and wax was a familiar experience, one that reminded him distinctly of his comfortable study in Bag End. He supposed that was why he remained surprisingly relaxed even after receiving Dís's latest letter. Poor Thorin, on the other hand, looked suitably harassed.

"She owns a distillery business, one she has constructed from the ground up. I have been trying for years to talk her out of it." He continued to glare heatedly at his sister's letter. Bilbo had never seen Thorin give such a strong look of utter disapproval to anything or anyone before. Even *he* had not received this look during that disastrous evening in Bag End when they had first met and Bilbo had known *exactly* how much Thorin did not like him then. The Hobbit winced and felt a twinge of sympathy for Dís, but he did not understand why Thorin was so upset. A distillery business did not sound so bad.

"What's wrong with that?" he asked innocently.

Thorin looked up from the letter and directed his furious glare at Bilbo. The Hobbit immediately regretted his question. Oh, what terror had he unleashed now?

"She leaves the safety of the mountains and instead, spends her time in the fields with her crops among those…those riff-raff workers of hers!" Thorin exploded thunderously. The letter was still held in his hands but the paper was rapidly crinkling from the violent way he was clutching at it. Bilbo eyed it with trepidation from his stool beside the king.

"When she is not working with her *crops*," he spat that word out viciously, "she is in her distillery, surrounded by those infernal machineries and exposing herself to Mahal knows what kind of danger! If that is not enough, she runs off to the nearby villages of *Men*, peddling her products! Her! A princess of the line of Durin, degrading herself to a…to a…"

"A button-seller?" Bilbo squeaked. He slowly nudged his seat away from Thorin.

"A button-seller!" Thorin positively snarled. If there were any button-sellers nearby, they would have fled in fear for their lives at the Dwarven king's murderous tone.

Bilbo shifted uncomfortably from his spot. Why did he have to open that can of worms? He placed the seeds and the instruction sheet on the ground beside him, got up stiffly to pour out two cups of chamomile tea – because tea will solve *anything* – and handed one to Thorin. The Dwarven king grunted and promptly downed his beverage in two large gulps. When he looked like he had calmed a little, Bilbo poured him a fresh cup (just in case) and asked, "And what does Dís think about all this?"

Thorin raised a brow and looked questioningly at Bilbo. The Hobbit took that as a sign to elaborate. “I can understand that you’d worry constantly about her. Which older brother wouldn’t worry about their younger sibling, let alone their sister? I’m just wondering if Dís thinks what she’s doing is as horrible as you made it out to be.”

Thorin snorted into his cup. “Of course she doesn’t. She does what she wants and she’s clearly sold on her business idea.” He lifted his cup and took a smaller, calming sip this time, “Once her mind is set on something, nothing will deter her from her goal. Never mind the danger that she openly invites to herself.” He shook his head and grimaced, “Such recklessness.”

Bilbo choked on his mouthful of tea. Thorin looked up in alarm, “What? What is it?”

“Oh, I cannot believe this!” Bilbo still managed to sound incredulous in between his bouts of coughing. Concerned and confused, Thorin patted lightly on his back until the Hobbit cried out shrilly, “She is just like you!”

Thorin froze. “No, she isn’t.”

“Yes! She most certainly is!”

“No, she is much more reckless than I am.”

“Thorin, you went on a quest to fight a dragon with no actual plan on how to go about defeating him.”

“I brought help with me!”

“What you brought were twelve other Dwarves.” Bilbo tilted his head forward and gave Thorin a look that showcased how incredibly unimpressed he was. Thorin tried not to cringe. “Gandalf was the one who brought me along. Together, we’re hardly a mighty cavalry,” Bilbo added glibly, “Besides, your sister has help for her business too and I imagine that it’s a lot more than thirteen other people.”

Thorin opened and closed his mouth a few times and really, what can he say to that? Bilbo got him there. Still, he managed to splutter, “Well, we won!”

Bilbo rolled his eyes and went back to his cool tea. “Of course we did.”

“And we will have songs dedicated to our acts of bravery, which is something that Dís will not have. That’s another difference between us.”

“Sure, why not?”

The Dwarf frowned, “You do not sound appropriately impressed.”

“I have heard the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins,” Bilbo said dryly. “It is rather hard to be impressed by that.”

Thorin winced. He could see where Bilbo was coming from. “If you do not like it so much, we can always make our own,” he offered, a small grin already spreading on his face. He drained the last of his tea and set the empty cup on top of the much hated *Soil Composition Assessment* report. It may have been a boring read but it made a very good coaster for his drink.

Bilbo laughed and his eyes glinted mischievously, “Yes, the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield. It will be about a Dwarf king who stubbornly decided to go on a reckless quest to fight a dragon without any actual plans.”

“Huh, he sounds like a perfectly respectable fellow. Strong-willed and fearless. The making of a great leader.” Thorin replied without batting an eye. He leaned back in his chair, interlocking his fingers over his stomach, and smirked at Bilbo. “Meanwhile, this brave king is accompanied by his fellow Dwarves and one fussy little Hobbit – ”

“Fussy?! Little?!”

“…who hasn’t done much fighting but apparently, is quite skilled at conkers,” the Dwarf continued smoothly as if he had not been interrupted by Bilbo’s cries of outrage. The smirk had not left his face but he was visibly struggling to keep it from devolving into laughter.

Bilbo puffed up playfully. “I’ll have you know that where I come from, conkers is a most noble sport,” he said in a tone so imperious that it would have given Lobellia Sackville-Baggins a run for her money.

“Is it now?” Thorin said neutrally, his voice brimming with mirth.

“Now who’s the one who does not sound appropriately impressed?”

“I don’t know. I have seen you play your word game, which I have also been told is a noble sport in the Shire. The incident with the Trolls makes it very hard to be impressed by it.” He cast a meaningful look at Bilbo and mimicked the Hobbit’s high, panicked voice, “The secret to cooking Dwarf is to skin them first!”

Bilbo looked helplessly at Thorin. He remained speechless for a few seconds before he folded into himself and dissolved into loud, knee-slapping guffaws. The Dwarven king’s composure broke just as spectacularly, and his laugh was so deep and rich that the sound naturally filled the tent, warming Bilbo to the core.

“Oh, do that again!” Bilbo wiped the tears from his eyes after spending a small eternity trying to compose himself. “That impression of me was brilliant! Can you do someone else?”

Thorin opened his mouth to presumably do another impression, but he was interrupted by a knock.

“Sorry to barge in on you this late.” Balin strode into the tent with Dwalin by his side, their hands filled with tall stacks of papers. Balin did a double take when he spotted Bilbo on his stool beside Thorin and the wide grins they were

each spotting. “Working hard as usual, I see,” he said dryly.

Dwalin peaked from behind the column of paper he was carrying. “Oh, hello there Master Baggins. Fancy seeing you here,” he greeted cordially. By Dwalin’s standard, that was a very cheerful greeting.

He must be in a good mood today, Bilbo thought in passing.

The Hobbit returned the greeting just as easily and turned to Balin, “Thorin received a new letter from Dís and she left a packet of seeds for me to try out. We wanted to discuss it…” He trailed off when he bent down to reach for his previously discarded package and the sheet of instructions from the floor.

“But we went a bit off topic,” Thorin finished gracefully for him with just a hint of smile.

“Well, I should get going,” Bilbo said lightly with the seeds securely in his hand and the instructions folded neatly into his pocket. He got up and dusted himself off. “Looks like you’ve got real work to do now and my presence is going to be a distraction.”

Thorin rolled his eyes but he waved him off. “Oh yes, go ahead and save yourself. Don’t mind me while I drown in this sea of paperwork.”

Bilbo turned around so that he was walking backwards towards the tent’s exit, sporting the world’s largest shit-eating grin. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Thorin! Look alive,” he said without a hint of remorse.

“Bilbo, wait!” The Hobbit paused at the Dwarven king’s urgent call. Thorin looked unexpectedly serious all of a sudden; his eyes were dark and his brows were furrowed. Just as Bilbo stepped closer to ask what was wrong, that *Mahal-cursed* Dwarf broke into a *very* familiar song:

“In the middle of the Earth in the land of the Shire lives a brave little Hobbit whom we all admire…”

Oh he did not just…“Stop it! Stop it this instant! Stop singing that dreadful song!” Bilbo screeched and desperately tried to block the lyrics of *the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins* from his ears with his palms. “Oh, now it’s in my head! I hope you’re happy with yourself!”

And indeed, Thorin looked extremely pleased with the damage he had wrought. “Good night, Bilbo,” he called out as the Hobbit beat a hasty retreat. “Have a pleasant evening!”

He turned back to Dwalin and Balin, only to see them both staring at him with their brows raised.

“What?”

Notes:

A/N: One day, I will write a chapter that contains less than 5k words. Today is most definitely not that day. One of these days, I will also write characters who are not snarky.

Looks like today is a day wrought with many failures.

This chapter lays the foundation for the next one, where shit should begin to happen.

Thank you so much for your support. It’s insane how enthusiastic you guys are. Wow! As usual, a very big thank you to those who specifically kudosed, recced, favourited, and reviewed. You guys keep me going, you honestly do. As usual, please let me know what you guys think!

NOTES!

[1] Soil composition is written in Westron (as with all texts related to gardening) since their authors were mainly Men.

[2] I googled ‘Do Dwarves grow their own food?’ and found a long discussion over the forums about this. The great people of the interwebs had decided ‘no’ and they also provided explanations to how the Dwarves can sustain themselves. What I used for this chapter was the explanation that made the most sense to me.

[3] As for using ‘food-grower’ as an insult, this was inspired from a quote in the ‘Quest of Erebor’ (from Tolkien’s Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth). Basically, Gandalf met up with Thorin in Bree right before the events of The Hobbit and Thorin invited Gandalf to the Blue Mountains to talk. On their journey there, they passed by the Shire. According to Gandalf, Thorin had a haughty disregard of the Hobbits, and “as far as he was concerned they were just food-growers who happened to work the fields on either side of the Dwarves' ancestral road to the Mountains."
I combined this with what I have researched (see Point [2]) to come up with what I hope to be an original explanation as to why Dwarves don’t farm. Dwarves are real jackasses here. Yikes.

[4] Teleporno is an Elvish name (from Telerin rather than Sindarin language) that means "Silver-high". Apparently, Celeborn's name translates to that. Credit goes to Steerpike13713 on AO3 for that suggestion.

[5] ‘Button-seller’, ‘conkers’, and ‘cooking Dwarf’ quotes all shamelessly taken from the movie. Conkers is a game with a piece of string attached to a seed of horse-chestnut trees. It’s…got absolutely nothing to do with fighting, which

made Bilbo's attempt to impress Thorin even more lame.

[6] I did not make up 'The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins'. Seriously guys, you need to see this shit if you haven't already. :D

Chapter 3 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1336649)

Notes:

Betaed by the very lovely Ariel Trachna as always. Thank you very much!

I have a tumblr now! Hurray! Go there and ask questions if you like (but don't be mean) or share my fascination in cat-related gifs: bgtea.tumblr.com. :D

Unless you hate cats or something, then in that case don't tell me or else we can't be friends anymore.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_3_endnotes).)

IV. Fíli and Kíli

To my two wonderful sons who should not be following the footsteps of their uncle in adopting his overly suspicious nature,

Your lack of faith in me is both appalling and mildly hurtful. Who do you take me for, a common thug? Of course I would never hurt your Mr. Baggins!

Unless he has given me good reasons for it. In that case, I would not hesitate to gut him like a fish.

Oh, I can practically feel the nervousness rolling off the both of you in waves. Rest assured, there is nothing to fear. Your handsome little Burglar is safe from me. (And he is absolutely adorable if young Master Ori did him any justice in his portrait! No wonder your Uncle likes him so much. He always did favour them small, comely-looking, and with a bit of fire in them).

I briefly stayed in the Shire for business-related purposes and I had the opportunity to learn more about your Hobbit. He is well liked in town and I only heard good things about him, so I rather approve of his presence in the Company. Actually, on second thought, I heard mostly good things about him. I'm not sure what to make of his odd love for doilies and mushrooms, but I suppose that it's only natural for someone to have a few personality quirks here and there. At the very least, he's nowhere near as bad as your uncle!

I'm happy that you have decided to tell me the truth about your health, though I wish I had been informed of this sooner. Still, it is a relief to hear that the both of you are in good spirits despite this nasty lying habit you have picked up from your uncle. Kíli, please spare your poor mother from having a heart attack and step away from the crossbow. I know you are bored, dear, but you will have plenty of time to pick-up your archery skills once you are fully healed. Fíli, stop encouraging him and try not to traumatize poor young Ori too much. I know you both like the sight of him blushing, but that is no excuse to cause him grief. The only time you may cause anyone grief is if you're grilling them for information. We *talked* about this.

If you find yourself with nothing to do, I have a little task I would like to ask of you. I would like you to keep an eye out on your Uncle whenever he is around Master Baggins for the next two weeks. Obviously, I will not expect you to sneak into their tents, but I would like the answers to the following questions:

1. On average, how many times do they meet in a day?
2. How long do these meetings (or meeting if it's just the one) last?
3. How do they behave after the meeting(s)?

Thank you, boys. I cannot stress the importance of keeping this little favour away from prying ears, especially your uncle's. I shall look forward to hearing back from you both.

With lots of love as always,

Your mother

Thorin's Hall, 2941.

PS. I am proud of you, my dear Fíli. You have come a long way with your lessons in diplomacy, and I especially liked the way you attempted to blindside me with flattery. I have taught you well, but apparently, not well enough. Is there a troll-related incident that I should know about?

Fíli and Kíli stared at the letter they were sharing in their hands in undisguised abject horror.

"How did she know about the Troll incident?!" Kíli spluttered in panic. He stared at his brother with wide eyes but the older Dwarf shrugged just as helplessly from beside him, looking confounded by their disturbingly perceptive mother. She was obviously drawing from whatever psychic powers all mothers seemed to possess in their arsenal when it came to minding their children's business.

"I don't know!" Fíli cried exasperatedly, "You know how she just…*knows* things!" The blond waved his free hand in the air like he had once seen a fortune teller do. Clearly, he agreed with Kíli's assessment of their mother's omniscience. "The better question is: do we tell her?"

They looked at each other, looked back down at inconspicuous neat runes on the letter, and winced.

"Yes," they concluded unanimously. It was better for them to cut their losses when they were already beaten.

Especially when their opponent was their psychic mother whose wrath they did not want to incur, ever.

The bright afternoon sunlight streamed through the tent's open entrance, lending the room a bright, cheerful atmosphere. Unfortunately, this was entirely lost on the tent's two residents, who were huddled by their desk and cowed by the ominous feeling of impending trouble they had come to associate with Letter Days. The feeling started when they were in their uncle's tents not even half an hour ago, only to see the Dwarven king cringe bodily at whatever their mother had written to *him*. The brothers had beaten a hasty retreat shortly after.

There were some things that neither Dwarf wanted to see; their noble Uncle's pained expression from being eviscerated through a letter was one of them.

Fíli peered at the letter again, his eyes squinting in confusion as he reread the message. "Kíli," he started after a brief moment of silence, "don't you find this a bit…odd?"

"What's odd?" Kíli tugged the letter closer to him in curiosity. Fíli let go of the paper without any fuss and instead, crossed his arms high across his chest. He furrowed his brows, thinking deeply.

"Mum's sudden interest in Bilbo, her adventure in the Shire, and now this fun little spy mission that she is setting us on."

"Well, it's only recently that she heard of Bilbo Baggins so I can understand why she would want to find out more about him," Kíli offered hesitantly. "Besides, the Shire adventure was for her business."

"Assuming that what you said is true, how would you explain this favour that she is asking us now? And why would she want us to keep this to ourselves?"

Kíli shrugged again. "What? Do you think she's trying to gauge Bilbo Baggins some more? Mum doesn't trust very easily." The younger Dwarf folded the letter and tucked it into his pocket inside his cotton tunic before adding, "Although that doesn't make much sense, come to think about it, not when she clearly told us that she approves of Bilbo already. You think she's looking for something more specific?"

"I think Mum's on to something and these questions will help validate whatever conclusion she's come up with." Fíli frowned and sat heavily down on a cushioned chair by the desk. "Whatever she's trying to figure out has to do with Uncle as well or else she wouldn't be asking us to monitor them both while keeping Uncle in the dark."

Kíli moved closer to Fíli and placed a comforting hand on his brother's shoulder. "Huh. Reckon we should ask someone for their opinion?"

Fíli reached up and squeezed his brother's hand in response. "Who do you suggest? We have to make sure that this person is trustworthy and won't go around gossiping like girls, which pretty much eliminates most of the members of our company."

Two pairs of eyes lit up as the both brothers simultaneously came to the same conclusion.

"Ori," they said together in a rush.

"Oh no, what do those two want now?" Ori groaned miserably under his breath when he spotted Fíli and Kíli walking steadfastly towards him.

They always manage to catch me when I am at my busiest too, he thought sourly. He tightened his grip on the scroll that Dori had sent him to fetch. Last time, the brothers' interruption had slowed him in his parchment delivery and it had earned him a disapproving look from Balin. Not one to blame other people – even when they were annoying, trouble-making terrors who deserved it – Ori simply lowered his head to apologize for his tardiness.

At least his older brother would be much more forgiving if he was a bit slow in his task this time…

Ori shook his head vehemently. *No, there won't be a 'this time'*. He refused to be a part of whatever scheme the two Dwarves had concocted and it was time that he did something to show for it.

Clenching his jaw and steeling himself, Ori determinately spun around and walked mechanically between the two tents nearest to him. Once he made sure that he had been blocked from Fíli and Kíli's line of sight, he dropped all pretences of calmness and *bolted like a bat out of hell.*

"Oy, Ori! Where did he disappear off to?"

Ori smirked at the confusion in Kíli's voice but he did not dare to slow down, at least not until he spotted Dori's tent. He was certain that his brother's presence would protect him against the princes. After all, Dori's temper and overprotective nature are legendary.

"He's running away! After him!"

The smug look of satisfaction on Ori's face gave way to panic. He had not expected them to spot him so quickly! Eyes widening in mild horror, he ran with much more gusto than before towards the direction of his meeting place, kicking up small clouds of dust behind him every step on the dirt road.

"Ori! C'mon! Stop running, we just want to talk!"

They are lying liars who lie, the scribe thought viciously. He turned his head briefly to shout back without slowing down, "No you don't! You both are lying liars who lie!" Because some things deserved to be said out loud like that.

"Oh for the – Kíli, take the right and I'll take the left."

They were trying to flank him, Ori realized a second after hearing Fíli's order, mildly outraged and grudgingly impressed by their tactics. Those crafty hell-raisers were actually going to flank him like he was some sort of hunted deer!

Ori narrowed his eyes on the road ahead. Well, two could play this game! Ori may not have the strength and stamina as the two warrior princes, but Nori had (secretly) taught him a few tricks to evade unwanted followers.

Without warning, the scribe darted straight to the right, going off the road and towards the cluster of stalls and workers. He vaulted over an overturned cart, landing delicately on the balls of his feet and without breaking his stride, continued sprinting forward. Behind him, he could hear the brothers squawking in surprise by his sudden change in direction. Ori laughed at their reaction and happily meandered into the maze of stands. He weaved deftly between the wooden structures, ducking under large beams and squeezing between narrow gaps that he knew the princes would have trouble fitting through. He dove right into the thick crowd of jostling and bustling Dwarves the moment he broke free.

He couldn't keep this up forever though and he would need to find somewhere to catch his breath soon. Ori spotted a small, decrepit storage tent in front of him and after checking around quickly to see if he was being followed, he beelined towards it. On his way there, he randomly spotted an empty water bucket on the ground with a piece of brown, threadbare scarf tied to the handle. He grabbed it quickly, feeling suddenly inspired, just before sneaking into tent.

Ori immediately pressed himself against the walls the moment he was inside, clutching at his chest and struggling to catch his breath but he was wearing a wide grin on his face. He could not believe he pulled that off! Nori's lessons had actually paid off and never in a million years would he expect to use them against his friends, of all people. Oh, if only his brother could see him now.

Still grinning broadly, the scribe did a quick spot check around the small cramped room and aside from the piles of leather scraps and broken, twisted metal buckles, the place was empty. He was lucky; there were no other Dwarves present and he was spared from having to make excuses for what undoubtedly looked like suspicious behaviour.

Just as the scribe finally got his heart to stop hammering furiously in his chest, Kíli and Fíli's voices drifted into the tent from the outside, calling his name over the muffled noise of the crowd. It cut through the haze of self-satisfaction and victory that Ori was basking in.

Right, it was time to enact what Nori called *Phase Two* before he was caught.

Ori rapidly pulled off his trademark brown coat – *too recognizable for the princes so it had to go*, he thought distractedly – and rolled it up into a small bundle with the Dori's scroll at its centre. Together with his belt, he stuffed his belongings into the empty bucket while making sure that they could be grabbed easily in case he needed to make another quick escape. The effect from the loss of his coat was immediately noticeable and Ori shivered slightly from the winter cold. He quickly pulled his thick hood over his head, sighing in relief at the bit of warmth it brought but also realizing that the knit-wear was a dead giveaway to who he was. Looking around to see what he could use to further disguise himself, his eyes lit up at the brown scarf still attached to the bucket handle. He untied it, his frozen fingers giving him grief over the knot, and generously wrapped the scarf over his grey hood until all of it was well and truly hidden.

He probably looked utterly ridiculous and more like an old, grandmother than anything, but hopefully, the disguise would be enough to fool Fíli and Kíli.

Ori picked up the bucket and forced himself to shuffle slowly out of the tent. He hunched over, partly to preserve as much heat as he could and partly to make himself blend in with the surrounding crowd even more. Ever so slowly, he followed the flow of traffic until he was back on the road again, all the while keeping his ear out for Fíli and Kíli. After a good ten minutes without hearing a single peep from them, he allowed himself to relax. *Maybe they gave up?*

A sudden violent gust of wind blew into the Dwarf's face, causing him to shiver terribly from the icy cold. The threadbare brown scarf was rapidly unravelling and Ori struggled to keep the cloth in place but his fingers were frozen and he could not force them to cooperate. A second gust of wind brought an end to that, ripping the scarf from him and Ori watched the cloth flutter away in resignation. *Oh well*, the young Dwarf thought, a bit saddened by the loss of his disguise as he shrugged his coat back on, *it had been fun while it lasted*. Besides, he was close enough to see Dori's tent so he should be –

"There you are, Ori! See, Fíli? I told you he would be walking this way!"

Ori froze in place.

No.

Ori turned his head to the side and sure enough, there they were. Fíli and Kíli were sitting cross-legged on the ground beside the road, both of them munching nonchalantly on an apple. A large sack of apples were behind them, and from the ring of leftover apple cores on the ground around them, it was evident that the two Dwarves had been freely helping themselves to the bag. They looked like they had been waiting for a while but had made themselves perfectly comfortable in the meantime.

Ori let out a strangled noise from his throat that sounded suspiciously like a sob.

"We just wanted your help," Fíli started gently as if he was trying to calm a skittish horse, "it's about Bilbo and Uncle _ "

Ori clapped his hands over his ears to desperately stave off the flood of mental images from That Incident. "No," he cut the other blond Dwarf off with uncharacteristic brusqueness. He started to back away slowly.

Fíli frowned and beside him, Kíli slowly got up. Both of them were staring at the scribe with renewed interest. "I haven't even finished the question," the elder brother pointed out. "Why are you so persistent in refusing?" He narrowed his eyes, looking suspiciously at the scribe and Ori had this sudden feeling that something terrible was about to happen.

"You know something," Fíli concluded after a bit of silent staring, wonder and curiosity colouring his tone and every instinct in Ori was screaming at him to *run, run now!*

Like a bloodhound catching on to the scent of his prey, Fíli *would not let this go*. He continued almost fervently, his eyes locked on to the younger Dwarf. "You know something and it has to do with Uncle and Bilbo. What is it? What's going on?"

"I don't know anything! I swear!" Ori cried and he wasn't lying, per se. He had only been inside Thorin's tent that one time and saw what he thought to be a suspicious amount of touching between the king and their burglar. As far as he was concerned, it could very well be because they are friends! Perfectly good friends touch each other (platonically), help remove each other's clothes with surprising amount of familiarity (platonically) and stare at each other soulfully in the eyes…platonically?

Right?

Ori had never been very good at lying to himself.

Apparently, Fíli and Kíli thought so too since his protests had obviously fallen to deaf ears. The two brothers were slowly advancing closer. Ori gulped and finally caved to his instinct.

He turned tail and ran for the second time that day.

The Dwarf felt a brief tug on his hood and knew that he had narrowly escaped being grabbed. A flash of anger bubbled through him, the same fiery feeling of defiance that screamed at him to use Nori's tricks to shake off the two Dwarves. That hood took him two long, painstaking months to make and they could have ripped it with their careless, grubby paws! Fíli and Kíli had always been pushy with the way they treated Ori. This time, he'd had it and *he would not let them win*.

The Dwarf reached into the bucket he was still clutching to retrieve his belt and Dori's scroll. With his other hand, he unceremoniously tossed the bucket to the ground behind him. The loud resounding yelp behind him sent a vindictive thrill of satisfaction coursing through him. *Take that, you pushy sods!*

Turning around slightly, Ori yelled defiantly over his shoulder, "You will not take me willing!" He blanched when he realized how close the two were behind him.

"That bucket trick was mean!" Fíli called out in a sing-song voice, not at all offended by Ori's desperate attempt to stall them.

"Luckily for us, we've got these nifty shin guards!" Kíli said with utter glee and *damn* the both of them for not having the decency to at least sound slightly winded or pained.

"We can keep this up all day, Ori!" Fíli teased and Ori knew he had a point. They could easily outpace the scribe, especially after they had their nice rest by the roadside. Ori was already feeling the effects of sprinting so much; his sides were starting to ache, an unpleasant numbing feeling was slowly creeping up his legs and he was breathing more and more raggedly.

I just need to find Dori's tent, Ori thought desperately, *I just need to – there! There it is!*

The familiar striped tent was a sight for sore eyes and if Ori wasn't so busy concentrating on *breathing*, he would have openly wept in happiness. He was getting close, so close! He could see the entrance and oh thank you Mahal, the door was wide open!

Unfortunately, Fíli and Kíli saw where he was heading and made a last ditch attempt to lunge for him. Sensing the oncoming collision, Ori put forth every last bit of energy he had left to escape. He instinctively dove for the entrance just as one of the brothers grabbed his leg. Instead of face-planting, Ori shook off the hold, tucked his limbs close to him while keeping the scroll and his belt cradled protectively against his chest and automatically dropped into a roll the moment he hit the ground. The momentum sent him tumbling through the entrance and well into the tent. He did not stop rolling until he crashed into something in his path.

By the Valar, what just happened?

Disoriented, he uncurled himself to lie on the ground with his tired limbs spread out. The world around him was a blur and he shut his eyes to avoid seeing the swirling mess of colour around him. He took a few seconds to breathe, *just breathe*, and distantly, he could feel the press of the scroll and his belt against his palm. Somehow, he made it inside the tent with the scroll intact, barely escaping the Dwarven princes' clutches.

Ori flung an arm over his eyes and started to laugh hysterically, albeit a bit breathlessly. He had done it! He had beaten Fíli and Kíli at their own game! Score one for the willowy, weedy scribe against those stupidly athletic Dwarven princes! In their faces, in their handsome, smug faces!

Oh that was absolutely spectacular. That was brilliant and he still could not believe he had *won*!

Without lifting his arm off his eyes and without getting off the ground, Ori waved the scroll blindly in the air with extra flourish. "Here's your scroll, Dori! You wouldn't believe the trouble I had to go through to get this to you." He could not keep the wild grin off his face though. He must look a bit deranged to his poor brother.

A brief moment of silence descended over the tent. Curious, Ori lifted his arm from his eyes.

Dwalin was peering down at him.

Ori looked up, blinked again, and croaked out, "You're not Dori."

"Nay, lad." Dwalin agreed in an oddly controlled voice, "Your brother is in the next tent over." Ori looked around for the first time and to his surprise, he was lying by Dwalin's feet on what was most definitely *not* his brother's tent's floor.

Oh.

Oh.

Ori stared up at Dwalin with growing mortification. He must have broken his roll when he crashed into the older Dwarf's legs, judging from his awkward position and how he could feel the warrior's shin pressing into his ribs.

Then, it dawned on Ori. He made what was possibly his most over-the-top entrance in the history of ever and not only was it for the *wrong tent*, he had crashed into the one Dwarf he respected the most outside of his family. At this moment, he was dusty, dirty and lying on his back, gaping at said Dwarf like an idiot.

This was so unbelievably embarrassing. Ori could not even begin to process. *How was this his life?*

Neither of them spoke for a few more seconds. The corners of the warrior's lips were twitching more and more violently with every passing second.

"Oh, go right ahead and laugh," Ori groused bitterly at the sight, finally lowering the scroll back down and shattering the awkward silence like glass. He was sprawling like a starfish on the ground and he did not think that he had enough dignity left to care anymore. That was it. He gave up. "I can see how hard you're trying to hold it in."

Dwalin shook his head and tried – bless him for his valiant attempt – to spare Ori's feelings by reeling in his laughter. Ori wilfully ignored how hard the older Dwarf's shoulders were shaking and accepted the offered hand to pull him off the floor.

"That was quite the entrance there," Dwalin said in that deep, low voice of his that never failed to send shivers running down Ori's spine. "Are you sure you're all right?"

His expression was surprisingly kind and Ori would have never been able to imagine the warrior sporting anything other than his usual grim countenance before their adventure. But Ori was a different person from before and their journey to Erebor had shown him a much more humane side to the older Dwarf. Nowadays, the scribe wasn't even sure how he could have been afraid of Dwalin to begin with.

The blond Dwarf smiled back wanly, "Nothing broken." *Except my pride and dignity*, he added privately in his head. Dwalin seemed to have sensed his thought and he grinned teasingly back, but his hand on Ori's back was gentle when he guided the Dwarf to sit on a chair before lowering himself on a sturdy wooden one.

"Mind explaining to me what happened?"

Ori's face scrunched up in obvious distaste and he tightened his grip on the scroll that he was holding over his lap. Dwalin must have misinterpreted his expression as something else since he added rather hastily, "You don't have to if you

don't want to! Of course not! We can talk about something else entirely…" He trailed off indecisively and Ori had never seen the warrior look so uncomfortable.

Comforting people is clearly not his forte, the scribe thought, but he felt the tension bleed out of him at seeing the older Dwarf so out of his element. At least they would feel awkward and embarrassed together. This thought inexplicably cheered him up some.

"No, I don't mind…it's just, I don't know what to say." Ori relaxed his grip on the scroll and gave a small shrug of his shoulders.

Dwalin visibly relaxed and Ori's lips curled up into a tiny smile. "Why don't you start with what you were doing that led you here?"

It was as if the flood gates had finally opened. Ori broke into a passionate explanation, getting more and more worked up the further along into his story. Meanwhile, the older Dwarf listened silently except for the few times where he broke into coughing fits that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

"And you know what the worst part is? After I went through all that trouble, I found them by the roadside, sitting there having a…a picnic!" Ori exclaimed shrilly.

Dwalin grunted and coughed discretely into his fist again. "I wouldn't feel so bad, Master Ori," he said, "You did extremely well with your escape, so well that they had given up altogether on finding you and had to resort to waiting."

Ori huffed and crossed his arms. Dwalin gave him a knowing look, "I'm guessing they tried to pressure you into doing a favour for them again, and you escaped them a second time." Ori nodded, relieved when it was clear that Dwalin would not pry into the nature of that 'favour'.

Dwalin leaned forward where he sat, elbows on his knees and flat palms pressed together. "Fili and Kili can get overzealous sometimes. You were right to make their lives more difficult if only for a brief moment."

Ori was surprised by the answer. "You think I was right? Haven't you sworn loyalty to them?"

The older Dwarf rolled his eyes and snorted, "Yes, but that doesn't mean I can't call them out for acting like two little turds." The frank way he had said that sentence shocked a bark of laughter from the scribe. Dwalin looked pleased with himself.

"They should learn to treat you properly, Master Ori," added the warrior quietly when Ori's giggling was dying down. "You deserve kindness."

The young Dwarf startled a bit at the change of tone. Dwalin's expression was serious but his eyes were warm and sincere. Had Dwalin always looked at him this fondly? *When did this happen?*

"I suppose," Ori replied hesitantly. Dwalin stared at Ori and tilted his head in a curt nod and Ori returned a tentative smile.

Dwalin looked away and cleared his throat. "I can pass this along to your brother. I should be meeting him soon," he said gruffly and it took a split second for Ori to understand that the warrior was talking about the scroll on his lap.

"Oh no! I cannot have you do that for me!" Ori sounded appalled, "I have imposed on you so much already –"

Dwalin reached over to the young Dwarf with both hands and squeezed his shoulders. He had an indecipherable look on his face, one wrapped in different layers of emotions that the scribe did not know how to begin to interpret or what he had done to deserve them.

"Please," Dwalin said again, "I insist."

"I'd be much obliged," Ori found himself replying weakly, surprised that his voice did not break from his nerves. Satisfied with the answer, Dwalin gently let go of Ori to take the scroll in his own hands. He did not lean away.

"And if you ever need to talk again, do not hesitate to find me," the warrior continued firmly.

Ori nodded stiffly, his mouth gone dry by this sudden turn of events. *What was going on?*

"I…thank you?" The scribe swallowed and wished he would stop sounding so painfully awkward. He definitely needed to ask Nori for tricks to mask this. "And, uh, I'm sorry for bursting in on you like that. I held you up long enough with my silly story and you have a meeting to prepare. I really should…" He gestured to the entrance.

The chair creaked when Dwalin got up and just like before, the warrior placed a gentle hand on the small of his back as he guided Ori to the exit. Ori tried to will away the flush on his cheeks.

"Thank you, Master Dwalin. Nobody has offered to listen to me talk like that, and just…thank you." Ori said bashfully, flashing a fleeting shy smile. He gave a little bow and strode out, his gait confident and loose, showing none of the confusion that continued to stir in his head. Honestly, what on Middle-Earth was that about and since when did Dwalin consider him, of all people, a close friend? Dwalin was a Dwarf of action. He was not one to do subtle touches, undefined looks, and offers to listen to someone else talk about their *feelings*, but that was *exactly* what had happened back in that tent.

Maybe Dwalin had always seen him as a closer friend than Ori did with the warrior and maybe it was the young Dwarf who was oblivious to it all. Ori winced at the pang of guilt that surged in him. If that was the case, then he had a lot

to make up for. He wondered if Dwalin would appreciate something knitted…

A hand suddenly landed on each of his shoulders and a voice spoke from behind him. “Hello Ori, I hope you didn’t forget about us.”

Aw, crap.

MUM! DID YOU KNOW THAT UNCLE AND BILBO HAVE THIS THING GOING ON?
Fíli and Kíli
Erebor, 22 Dec., 2941

To my two oblivious sons,

You just noticed now? You have been around them constantly. How have you not realized this sooner? Honestly, I cannot be any more disappointed in the both of you.

Love,
Your mother
Thorin’s Hall, 2941.

PS. What did you think I meant when I said your uncle “favoured them small, comely looking, and with a bit of fire in them”?

PPS: Who told you?

Mum,

We thought you meant that Uncle likes certain types of friends…not the type of friend you’re thinking of, but the actual, friendly, *friend-friend* type! The ones who don’t want to do sexy sex things with each other! You know, *that* type.

Ori told us. He saw them canoodling! *(Well, technically, he said lots of soft whispered words, long passionate looks and unnecessary touching. Clothes may or may not have been removed. We couldn’t catch that last bit. He had gotten really red in the face and was mumbling at that point.)* Either way! I don’t ever want that mental image in my head, ever!

Fíli and Kíli
Erebor, 26 Dec., 2941

To my two perfectly lovely boys who should make it a habit of bringing their poor mother more happy news,

Sexy sex things? Canoodling? *Clothes being removed?* Oh my! I did not know your uncle was so bold. Well, he has always been the silent, overprotective type who will not hesitate to take what he wants. It’s not a stretch to see him get extra…handsy with the Hobbit so early on in their relationship, I suppose.

If that is the case, please report back if you noticed your Uncle or Bilbo with mussed hair, bruised lips, suspicious bite marks around the neck area, or walking with a limp right after they had their meeting. I trust that the both of you are old enough to know what someone looks like after being ravaged in a rigorous round of romping.

Love,
Your mother
Thorin’s Hall, 2941.

STOP. PLEASE, JUST STOP!
(The alliteration only made it so much worse!)
Fíli and Kíli
Erebor, 30 Dec., 2941

V. Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur

The mess hall was unsurprisingly deserted when Bofur, Bifur and Bombur trudged in with their platters of food.

"Well, we certainly know when to pick a great time to have our meals. Look at the wonderful selection of Dwarves we get to share our dining experience with." Bofur said jovially. His cousin and his brother walked on ahead and casually picked a seat among the rows and rows of empty tables.

"If someone actually showed up at noon, we wouldn't be eating at such a late hour." Bombur frowned morosely at his plate that was piled high with scalloped potatoes, an assorted selection of meat and half a wheel of cheese, "And we wouldn't be stuck with the scraps."

Bifur clapped a hand on his cousin's shoulder in sympathy before digging into his own little mountain of food. Bofur shook his head good naturedly at his brother's grumbling and took a seat across from the two Dwarves.

In the month after the Battle, the three had made a habit of eating together as often as they could. With every Dwarf either running around busy or confined to their recovery bed, it had become impossible for everyone in Thorin's Company to dine together like they had during the journey. Bofur missed the camaraderie and the closeness he had shared with his group of friends and he suspected that Bifur and Bombur felt just as bothered as he was by this newfound loneliness. Otherwise, the three would not have gone to such lengths to cling to each other.

"Hello there, I didn't know anyone would still be here!" a familiar, chipper voice called out near the entrance and the three Dwarves turned to greet the newcomer with enthusiasm. Bilbo Baggins had been especially busy and the few times Bofur had managed to catch him were during random moments of the day when they had accidentally bumped into each other. He shifted on his bench to make room for the Hobbit.

"So what brings you all here so late?" Bilbo asked after he had finished his plate of meats and potatoes.

"Bifur and I were sent on a mining expedition to map out one of the newly recovered underground sections in the western wing," Bofur said and Bifur grunted in agreement without looking up from his late lunch. "The mines were much deeper than we expected so it took us a long time before we could resurface. Bombur was waiting for us for lunch, which is why those two," he jerked his head towards the Dwarves who were scarfing down their plates of food like they were going out of fashion, "are a tiny bit ravenous."

Bilbo raised a questioning brow at Bofur's moderately-sized serving (for a Dwarf) on his plate and the Dwarf winked, "I went in today's mission prepared. I had a large breakfast."

Bombur picked off the last few crumbs from his plate and let out a loud, satisfying belch. He leaned back comfortably and placed his hand over his full stomach. Bilbo did not even react, let alone flinch or recoil like he would have when he had first joined the Company, which just showed how familiar he had gotten with the ways of the Dwarves.

I told him that he belonged with us, Bofur thought as he smiled in his mug of ale.

"And what have you been up to lately, Master Baggins? I haven't seen much of you aside from your random visits to the kitchen," Bombur asked and oh, this was news to Bofur.

"You visit the kitchens a lot?" Bofur gave Bilbo an incredulous look, "But where does it all fit?"

"Hobbits tend to eat seven meals a day, I'll have you know!" The Hobbit puffed his chest out and Bofur was tempted to reach over and muss his hair just to see him squawk in indignation. "Besides, I was mostly bringing food for other people. Fíli and Kíli like their pies and Thorin is much more agreeable after a platter of smoked meat." Bilbo paused briefly in thought before adding matter-of-factly, "The chamomile tea also helps."

"Huh, I guess that explains why the supplies of pies and the smoked meat have gone down so quickly," Bombur wondered out loud. Bifur, who just finished licking his plate clean, turned to his friends and spoke in a rapid fire of Khuzdûl. Bilbo stared confusedly when the three Dwarves burst into laughter.

"Bifur was asking about the nature of your visits to the king." Bofur translated happily but Bilbo knew from the twinkle in the Dwarf's eye that Bofur was glossing over what Bifur had *really* meant. "After all, it is not every day that one can venture into the lion's den and happen to discover that the great Thorin Oakenshield can be tamed by smoked meat and chamomile tea."

Bilbo blushed and huffed out, "I don't know what you are insinuating, Master Bifur, but Thorin asked me to be his counsellor for an issue that will be addressed at an upcoming meeting. I have been there to help him in his task." He levelled the three Dwarves a very disapproving look and Bofur grinned even wider. He recognized that facial expression; it was an attempt to replicate Thorin's own thunderous look of disapproval. On the Hobbit, the effect was greatly reduced and Bilbo looked more like an angry cherub.

"Peace, Master Baggins! We're only jesting. We mean no harm by it!" Bombur, ever the peace lover, gently placated and Bilbo visibly deflated. "Although I am glad to hear that you and the king have resolved your differences."

Bilbo perked right up, “Yes! We worked things through and everything is quite all right now! Working with Thorin really isn’t all that difficult at all.” The Hobbit added, almost shyly, “He actually is a lot more different than I had originally imagined him to be.”

From the corner of his eye, Bofur could see Bifur furrow his brows as he quickly signed his question in Iglishmêk. “Bifur was wondering what you meant by that and that he was sorry for causing offense,” Bofur translated and Bifur gave his thanks with a few more hand signals.

“Oh, none at all, Master Bifur. It’s all right.” Bilbo smiled kindly at the Dwarf to show that he was forgiven. “As to what I meant, well, I always imagined Thorin to be a serious, no-nonsense kind of Dwarf.” Bilbo paused, fingers tapping against his chin, “He can actually be downright silly when he wants to be.”

The three Dwarves stared at him in disbelief. “Begging your pardon, Master Baggins, but we find that extremely hard to believe,” Bombur spoke up and Bifur nodded rigorously in agreement.

“All right, just the other day, he received a letter from Dís.” Everyone at the table winced and looked conspicuously around them, as if the mere mention of her name would summon her presence to the room. Bilbo cleared his throat and continued, “*She* sent a letter and instead of opening it, Thorin attempted to bribe me to burn it so that he could pretend not to have received it.”

The Dwarves chuckled although they could definitely sympathize with their king. His sister brought fear in the Dwarves’ hearts. There were *stories* about such events with the most memorable one being the ‘Aftermath of the Teleporno Incident’. It was so terrifying that it did not deserve repeating.

“What did he attempt to bribe you with?” Bofur asked in a hush, transfixed with curiosity.

“A title,” Bilbo deadpanned. “He may have also thrown in a small fleet of ponies to sweeten the deal. When I told him that I wasn’t all that fond of riding a pony, he attempted to bribe me with a pony-drawn carriage instead. He even offered to carve it and add the gold trimming himself if I could somehow stop Dís’ Ravens from delivering any future letters.” Bilbo rolled his eyes, “And when I refused – ”

“Wait, you refused?!” Bofur interrupted in a squawk. He could not imagine insulting the king in such a grave manner by refusing those tremendous gifts. A title and a carriage built by the King himself! It was unheard of for Erebor’s kings to bestow this level of generosity for a non-Dwarf.

Bilbo, however, remained deeply unimpressed and he answered blithely, “Of course I did! I’m not encouraging him to evade his sister just because he is afraid of her! Besides, what would a simple Hobbit like me do with a title and a golden, pony-drawn carriage?”

Bofur supposed that there was logic in Bilbo’s decision but still, *a title and a carriage!* Did Bilbo not realize the honour of being offered these to begin with?

Bilbo carried on his story uninterrupted, but Bofur could see that his cousin and brother were both still trying to process the meaning behind Thorin’s over-the-top offers. “I pointed out that the plan was a stupid one. Lady Dís would only be more persistent if he did not respond anyway. Thorin agreed and do you know what he did next? He tried to bribe me, again!” The Hobbit drew himself up to his not-so-impressive height, but the Dwarves appreciated his attempt at righteous fury.

“This time, he tried to bribe me with the title and *two* golden, pony-drawn carriages, if I could write his replies to Lady Dís for him in return,” Bilbo scoffed and took a tentative sip of his ale. He hummed in satisfaction when he found it to his liking. “Really, he was just grasping at straws at this point. I can’t write in Khuzdûl so it would be very obvious to his sister that the letter was not his.”

“Surely the king must have realized this!” Bombur replied, sounding extremely incredulous. Bofur could not blame him. He and Bifur were trying to piece together this version of their king with the one they had known during their adventure.

“He did. The Dwarf had the audacity to offer to teach me Khuzdûl for the sole purpose of avoiding writing those replies. He said that if it meant he could get a few minutes of peace, it would be well worth it!”

The three looked on, bug-eyed and shocked. Bombur had forgotten to put down his mug and was left holding it halfway between the table and his gaping mouth. Bilbo was so consumed by retelling his story that he did not notice.

“After I refused a third time, he decided to exact his revenge by ordering a troupe of his servants to follow me around all day, singing the verses of the blasted, Ballad of Bilbo Baggins!” The Hobbit scowled deeply, “Of course, other Dwarves who were unaware of Thorin’s little prank decided to join in. The next thing I know, random Dwarves would burst into the chorus left, right and centre, whenever I was spotted!

At Bilbo’s scrunched up face, which Bofur had to admit was the picture perfect look of disgruntled misery, the three Dwarves laughed at their king’s antics. Let it be known that Thorin could deliver revenge swiftly and effectively when the situation required for it.

“Consider yourself lucky that the king did not immediately attempt to threaten you with that prank rather than baiting you with honey when he first asked.” Bombur grinned and Bilbo groaned. The Hobbit curled into himself and pressed his palms against his eyes, as if he was trying to shield himself from the unpleasant prospect.

“Don’t you dare give him any ideas!” Bilbo grouched dramatically. “Thorin is doing enough damage to my sanity as is! On top of all this, he hums the song under his breath to annoy me whenever I am within earshot!” That earned another round of enthusiastic laughter from the three Dwarves.

“He sounds like he is enjoying himself!”

Bilbo shot Bofur a dirty look, not at all appreciative of the Dwarf’s undisguised glee. “Oh, very much so. My misery has lifted his spirits. I haven’t seen him so prone to laughter,” the Hobbit replied in a dry, withering tone.

“I don’t know whether to thank the song writer or to kill him. Maybe both? I could thank him and then kill him afterwards,” Bilbo muttered darkly, taking another sip from his mug.

Bifur coughed uncomfortably all of a sudden, seemingly choking on air. Bombur helpfully thumped on his back.

“Master Baggins,” Bofur hesitated because really, how does one continue with this question without sounding too intrusive? “What would you say King Thorin is to you?”

Bombur looked back and forth between his brother and the Hobbit a couple of times. His eyes widened when he caught on what his brother was really trying to find out.

Bilbo looked at Bofur like he had asked the strangest question, “Thorin is my friend of course! A very good one!” He furrowed his brow, “Why did you ask?”

“Oh nothing, just curious really,” Bofur said lightly, doing an excellent job at concealing his incredulousness. Bifur and Bofur did not even attempt to stop staring in disbelief at Bilbo’s oblivious response. “And you were right! King Thorin can be rather silly. I guess you must be *very* good friends with him for him to feel this comfortable around you!”

“Well, I’m glad you all finally see reason,” Bilbo joked and Bofur drank a mouthful of ale to keep himself from laughing at how his friend *completely* missed his implication. The Hobbit got up from his bench with his mug and plate in his hands. “I’m afraid I have to leave you, gentlemen. Our gracious king is waiting for me to start another session of Bilbo taunting.” After exchanging a round of warm goodbyes, Bilbo headed for the tent’s exit.

The three remaining Dwarves all drank their ale silently until they could hear that the Hobbit’s footsteps had faded away completely.

They exchanged a look with each other and immediately burst into excited chatter.

“Did you hear that? ‘A very good friend’, he said! I wonder if he even realized what any of that actually meant.”

“I just can’t believe that our King would do any of that. A title and a carriage, by Mahal!”

“And the offer to teach him Khuzdûl!”

“…I agree, Bifur! Friends indeed. Bilbo Baggins is surprisingly thick in the head.”

“Do you think the King realized that his actions could be seen as an attempt to court the Hobbit?”

The three stopped to think. Bofur shook his head to dismiss his feelings of doubt and answered confidently, “Well, he must know! After all, our King is not a complete idiot.”

Fíli and Kíli’s Super Secret Awesome Spy Report

Targets: Uncle and Mr. Bilbo Baggins

Goal: To uncover further evidence to support Uncle and Mr. Baggins’ romantic relationship ~~and whether or not they had undergone rounds of rigorous romping because Mum is evil for putting that into our heads.~~

Impact of mission if successful:

1. Mother will leave us alone. She’ll be entirely too consumed with getting involved in Uncle’s business. (Note: Potential use for scapegoat at a later date?)

2. This will endear us to Mother even more. This is particularly useful in the event that Uncle decides to kill us when he discovers our involvement. Mother will be more likely to shield us from his wrath.

3. We will never have to do this ever again. Once is enough.

4. Makes for excellent material to further torment and tease Bilbo Baggins. May use it in exchange for more pies and/or cakes if the Hobbit ever refuses to bring us food.

5. May potentially leave mission with a few more mental scars and highly unpleasant images if we catch them in suspicious, compromising positions. (Note: Ask Óin if he has a potion to block out unpleasant, trauma-inducing thoughts.)

Day 1

Meeting time duration: Morning, nine o’clock until eleven o’clock

Summary of events: Followed Bilbo after he has delivered us our breakfast pie to Uncle Thorin's tent. I wanted to camp out there using a few low lying bushes as cover but Kíli complained about the thorns in the bush. *(They were uncomfortable and they were poking through my bandages!)* Instead, we compromised by hiding behind a stack of crates. The crates smelled like apples and half an hour into the wait, we got hungry. We decided to leave to find an acceptable food source. *(I found us a sack of apples and some left over mince pies from the night before.)* We proceeded to haul our food back to our location behind the crates and had an early lunch.

After eating, we decided to partake in the noble sport of hammer throwing but instead of hammers, we used the apple cores. *(Fíli and I argued over how to get rid of the trash and he challenged me to an apple core throwing competition. I said that I could reach the red and white tent with my throw and he said that I was an idiot)*. I was right, you didn't get the tent. You ended up beaning Dwalin in the head instead. *(We spent the next twenty minutes huddling quietly behind the crates, trying not to make too much noise so that he couldn't find us. He was very angry.)* I have never known Dwalin to be so creative with his insults.

We waited another ten minutes before we finally spotted Bilbo leaving the tent. He was perfectly dressed without a stray hair out of position *(no dopey smile on his face, no overly flushed skin, no suspicious limp)* so it didn't seem like he and Uncle were up to the horizontal tango this early in the morning.

Note to self for next stake-out: bring food.

We shall continue to update this report as we progress.

- Fíli and Kíli

Notes:

A/N: I wanted to fit another big scene where more serious stuff happened (because yes, I originally planned for a plot to show up in this chapter)…but I was afraid of overloading the readers. Oh well, the next big scene will have to go in Chapter 4 instead.

I can never say this enough but thank you for those who were kind enough to read, comment, kudos, rec, alert, and favourite the fic.

Notes for this chapter:

[1] This is a very intensive Ori chapter I know, and I am sorry for those who are not much of a fan for this character. For those who *do* like him, I hope I have not disappointed you. His characterization was inspired by his character description from LoTR wiki.

[2] I ninja-ed a ninja!Ori and some not-so-subtle Dwalin/Ori in there. I'd feel bad if his mortification hadn't been so ridiculously fun to write.

[3] I'm not sorry about the alliteration. I don't care how many groans I hear from you guys over this. :D

[4] Troll!Bifur from After the Dust Settles is back. Who spotted that reference?

Chapter 4 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1360826)

Notes:

A million thanks to everyone for their reviews! :) Hope you guys will enjoy this chapter!

Betaed by the wonderful Ariel Tachna, whose efforts are always appreciated.

You can follow me on tumblr: bgtea.tumblr.com. The Ask box is open so feel free to ask stuff, but don't be mean. Also, I like cats...you can probably tell from all the cat posts I reblog. Thought I should warn you guys about that.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_4_endnotes) .)

VI. Dáin and Bard

"Do we have everything that we need? All our documents, our reports?"

"Bilbo."

"The notes about the soil, where are the notes about the soil? Thorin, have you seen–?"

"Bilbo, breathe a little for Mahal's sake. You're starting to turn an alarming shade of red."

“I will have plenty of time to breathe after I have found the notes about the soil!”

Thorin spun a visibly panicked Bilbo around by the shoulder and held him in place before he could tear apart Thorin’s tent in his search. He pressed his forehead gently against the Hobbit’s. “Deep breaths. That’s it, inhale slowly and exhale.” When Bilbo did not look like he was seconds away from swaying dangerously on his feet, Thorin continued in the same calm, controlled voice, “I know you are nervous, but everything for the negotiation had been triple-checked by Balin already. He also has multiple copies of everything that we need.”

The Dwarven king tentatively let go of Bilbo and it looked like the Hobbit had regained his senses enough to look sheepish at his nervous reaction. *Good*, the Dwarf thought in relief, *he is calm enough to listen to reason*.

Out loud, he said reassuringly, “Balin has been doing this for longer than I have been alive. If nothing else, you can trust his experience in being an excellent advisor.”

“I just,” Bilbo wrapped his arms around himself protectively as he looked away. He swallowed thickly and Thorin could not tear his eyes away from the slight bob of his Adam’s apple. “I know this talk is really important, and I really want this to go well for all of us.”

A warm, bubbling feeling rose inside Thorin’s chest and the Dwarf smiled softly at his friend. He wondered if Bilbo noticed how naturally he had included himself among the Dwarves of Erebor from that rather telling response.

“We have done the most that we can at the moment and Bard is not an unreasonable man. The talk will not go too terribly.” Thorin remembered Bard’s look of relief when the Dwarf had extended his aid for the reconstruction of Dale and how readily Bard offered to set up trade talks with the Dwarves in return. It was evident that the new king of Dale wanted peace with Erebor as much as the Dwarves did. “At the very least, it will not be as unpleasant as it would if the Elves were involved.” Thorin grimaced as if he had smelled something foul in the room. *Pah. Elves.*

Bilbo shook his head slightly. “Thank goodness for small mercies,” he said dryly and Thorin scowled playfully at the Hobbit. His antics earned him a slight curl of the lips and an exaggerated, resigned sigh from Bilbo.

“Well, might as well get this show started. Balin is probably at the meeting place already.”

True to Bilbo’s prediction, Thorin and the Hobbit found Balin with a stack of notes under his arm outside of the large meeting tent, conversing lightly with Dáin Ironfoot. The Dwarven lord from the Iron Hills had brought his two advisors with him, and Bilbo did a double-take upon seeing the newcomers. The advisors could not possibly look any more different from each other; one was tall and thin (for a Dwarf), with a large, hooked nose on his long face, framed by sparsely braided, honey-coloured hair and beard. The other, in contrast, was wide and stout and – Bilbo was surprised to find – even shorter than the Hobbit himself. The Dwarf’s formidable bushel of dark brown beard was tucked into his simple silver belt, forming a wild, thick mass that covered the front of his upper torso. Meanwhile, his hair was neatly sectioned into an elaborate array of small braids. Both Dwarves flanked their lord in what was obviously a protective gesture, but their stances were relaxed and they conversed easily with Balin in a jovial manner.

Bilbo felt the nervous knot that had settled deep in his stomach begin to unravel. Thorin was right; this meeting wouldn’t go too badly at all if the people he had to converse with were friendly, decent folk like those Dwarves. The Iron Hills advisors were probably perfectly reasonable and Bilbo had nothing, *absolutely nothing*, to worry about.

That assumption persisted up until the two unknown advisors spotted Bilbo’s arrival. Their mirth died immediately, and they straightened up their backs, losing the comfortable, languid posture they had adopted just seconds ago. Their eyes hardened, and they watched the Hobbit with open, growing suspicion for every step he took closer.

Well then.

Bilbo tried not to stare back and engage in what would most likely be the most awkward staring contest ever. He felt his premature optimistic thoughts die a horrible death.

If Thorin noticed Bilbo automatically shifting closer to him, he did not say anything.

“Hail Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, King under the Mountain,” Dáin greeted in good cheer when the two stood beside Balin. He paused at the sight of Bilbo, “And this must be the famous Bilbo Baggins himself, the one from that delightful ballad!” He winked at the Hobbit and Bilbo tried not to glower when he felt Thorin’s sides shake in silent laughter beside him.

“Hail Dáin, son of Náin, son of Grór, Lord of the Iron Hills,” Thorin returned smoothly. He clapped a heavy hand over Bilbo’s shoulder, “And this is indeed Bilbo Baggins. If anything, the song did not do him enough justice. Perhaps a second, more detailed version of the ballad could be written.”

“Oh, what a grand idea!” Dáin cried out and Bilbo was torn between feeling extremely flattered and wanting to murder Thorin by strangulation.

Instead, he settled for bowing lightly to Dáin, conveniently hiding the annoyed tick in his left eye. “At your service, my Lord,” he replied cordially and from the corner of his eyes, he saw the Iron Hills advisors relax at their lord’s obvious enthusiasm at meeting the Hobbit. “His Majesty flatters me. One ballad is more than enough for a simple Hobbit such as myself. A second version is *really* unnecessary.” He eyed Thorin, and the Dwarven king pressed his lips into a thin line in an attempt to hide his grin.

“Really, really unnecessary,” Bilbo added emphatically with a stiff little nod. Just in case.

He gave Dáin a perfectly innocent smile when Thorin excused himself to let loose a cough that sounded suspiciously like laughter. From the king’s left side, Balin rolled his eyes at the spectacle and cleared his throat pointedly. “And I see that you have already met Balin of course.” Balin gave a small nod at Thorin’s introduction, still looking mildly disapproving at his king and at Bilbo.

Luckily, Dáin did not seem to catch on that anything was amiss. “Yes, of course. Master Balin is an old acquaintance, and I remember him as King Thrór’s advisor as well.” He looked quizzically between Bilbo and Thorin. “I hope I am not too bold to ask, my king, but why have you brought such an esteemed guest of Erebor to our meeting with the Men? Surely, with all that Master Baggins has done, he of all people deserves to be spared from the tortures of work!” The Dwarven lord grinned broadly at Bilbo, and the Hobbit found himself liking Dáin more and more, even if his question was an embellished way of asking Thorin, ‘what business does an outsider have here?’

Thorin, however, glowered in response. He brought a protective hand over Bilbo’s arm and pressed him closer to his side until the Hobbit was half buried into the fur of his surcoat. “I have invited Bilbo to this talk so that he may provide his expert opinions on food-growing. He has been an invaluable asset to me regarding this topic and with everything else.” He levelled a challenging look at the Iron Hills advisors and Bilbo had no idea how they were able to maintain their composure under the heat of Thorin’s impressive glare.

“Peace, my king. I meant no offense. I am certain that we will all benefit greatly from Master Baggins’ presence.” Dáin held up his hands in a pacifying gesture, his grin as wide as ever, but the sharp look in his eyes grew when Thorin only tightened his grip on Bilbo. “I believe you have yet to meet my most trusted advisors,” the Dwarf continued as if nothing was amiss. He gestured to the blonde Dwarf, “This is Frór, son of Baldur” and then to the brunet, “and this is Borin, son of Bláin.” Both Dwarves stepped forward, bowed, and replied in low, gruff voices, “At your service.”

“Now that we’ve all made each others’ acquaintances, shall we move inside?” Dáin rubbed his hands eagerly, and Bilbo was struck by how animate the Dwarf was compared to his monotonous advisors. The Dwarf carried enough good cheer for all three of them. What a strange trio they made.

As Dáin shuffled into the tent after Thorin, Bilbo and Balin, he continued speaking just as happily as before. “I, for one, would rather get this started as soon as possible. Not that I am expecting this to drag on for too long, of course. I’m sure that the meeting will turn out just fine. After all, how bad could it be?”

“Gentlemen, this is a disaster.”

Bard looked up from his notes and swept his serious gaze over the meeting attendants. He ignored the uneasy stirring of his advisors (*“Tact is the art of making a point without making an enemy, m’lord, even if you are speaking to Dwarves!”*) and ploughed straight through to what he wanted to say.

“From these figures, we are projecting a total of 500 Dwarves in Erebor and under 600 Men in Dale for the coming year. Most of these people are warriors and skilled workers. Simply put, we have nowhere near the amount of labour in the agricultural sector to support the population.” He added just for good measure, “Starvation is probably imminent if we continue as is.”

Bilbo watched in pity as Bard’s two advisors made this strange half-choking, half-gurgling sound. He had no doubt that their king had completely disregarded their advice about speaking with sensitivity. At least Thorin was surprisingly easy to manage and more than eager to listen to Bilbo.

The Hobbit tried not to look too smug from his seat beside the Dwarven king. It would be awfully inappropriate given the seriousness of their discussion.

“I have been actively encouraging my men to farm their own plots of land so that at the very least, they can support their families and their neighbours,” Bard reported with a surprising level of aplomb for someone who had just announced such terrible news. “Unfortunately, a majority of these men are untrained and their effectiveness is limited. Also, their attention is divided with the immediate reconstruction of their houses.” The dragon-slayer smiled wryly. “They are not very fond of living in tents.”

“Perfectly understandable! Dreadful business, those tents and horribly drafty too!” Bard’s advisors stared at Dáin, unsure of what to make of the Dwarf’s overly enthusiastic comment, one that was so jarringly out of place with the somber

environment around them. From beside their lord, Frór and Borin did not react at all and continued to look deeply unimpressed by the world around them. As always, Dáin carried on with an air of undiminished happiness. “If we send enough Dwarves to help with the construction of your homes so that your men can focus entirely on agricultural matters, would that sufficiently solve the problem?”

For the first time in the meeting, one of Bard’s advisors – a nervous looking man with a stooped posture and constantly shifting eyes – spoke up excitedly, “Your offer is very generous, my Lord, and it would most definitely help!” He dug through his pile of notes and pulled out a sheet filled with calculations. As his eyes rapidly scanned through the numbers, he said in relief, “We will still need to find more workers to prepare additional acres of land for farming, but the situation would be nowhere near as bleak as before.”

“Additional workers? And where do you wish to find these?” Thorin asked neutrally, although from his furrowed look and from those of the Dwarves around him, it was evident that they all knew what the answer would be.

Never one to beat around the bush, Bard asked bluntly, “If it is not too much to request, will there be any Dwarves who would be willing to lend their hands in the fields?”

Multiple cries of outrage rang throughout the tent and Bard’s shifty advisor looked like he was ready to sink into his chair to hide away from all the aggression. The bowman, on the other hand, was the epitome of cool-headedness; he kept his chin up and his hands calmly rested on the table with fingers laced together. When the noise died down, he spoke up loudly, “I have sent a missive to Lake-town and other cities to encourage farmers to settle in Dale, but there is no guarantee this will be successful. In my opinion, the most dependable strategy is to find people who are already here and are willing to work.”

“You must understand, your majesty,” Frór interjected. He spoke slowly and carefully in his characteristic nasally voice such that every word is properly enunciated. “We Dwarves pride ourselves on work that involves the full use of the great skills Mahal had blessed us with. To work away from the mountain as a food grower is…highly unusual and often times, undesirable.”

Bard’s second advisor, a large blonde whose features Bilbo would normally call handsome if they weren’t scrunched up in rage at the moment, stood up and spat out heatedly, “Without help, we will all starve! Surely you Dwarves find that much more undesirable than working in the fields!”

Things rapidly devolved into a state of madness after that. Each person in the room was as equally hell bent on getting their opinion across as their neighbour. At some point, the Dwarves and the Men had all gotten up, violently shouting over one another, with the exception of Bilbo, Bard and Dáin. But even Bard’s admirable self-control and Dáin’s good cheer could only last so long. With every new verbal onslaught, the bowman’s answers were becoming more and more curt, and as for the Dwarf, his smile was starting to slip off his face, giving way to a growing grimace.

Honestly, just for once Bilbo would like to be a part of a meeting where everyone would be *civil* to each other. Fed up, Bilbo stood up abruptly and cried out loudly, “I’ll help! I’ll volunteer!” Everyone turned to him in surprise and silence fell in the tent.

At least they had stopped arguing. Bilbo watched as everyone awkwardly shuffled back into their seats.

Thorin tugged gently at his sleeve, beckoning him to sit down. When Bilbo refused, the Dwarf gave him a worried look, “Bilbo…”

Bilbo flashed him a quick reassuring grin (or at least he hoped it looked like one) to disguise his nerves from being in the centre of attention. He turned to the rest of group. “I’m a Hobbit! Gardening is second nature to us and it is something that we take pride in.” At Dáin and his advisors’ obvious confusion, he clarified in the simplest way he knew how: “Gardening to Hobbits is akin to smithing to the Dwarves.” He gave a small smile at the wave of understanding murmurs that passed from the Iron Hills Dwarves.

“Besides, Lady Dís has sent me a package of barley and wheat seeds that she had growing for her business. According to her, they are fast-growing, and are both cold and drought resistant.” It was hard to keep the excitement from his voice but Bilbo had missed gardening horribly and he had missed experimenting with new species of plants. “I have done some preliminary investigation on the soil type around this region and I think the seeds would have no problems flourishing here. If I can have your permission, I would like to add these to the spring crops.”

Bard tipped his head in agreement, but Thorin, on the other hand, did not look pleased at all. He tightened his grip on the Hobbit’s sleeve and growled, “You are but one Hobbit and they need many workers. Besides, I will not have you exposed to unnecessary danger, not where I cannot see you.”

Oh, of all the ridiculous things that Dwarf can say!

“Thorin, I have already been exposed to plenty of unnecessary danger,” Bilbo pointed out and just in case if Thorin did not realize how ridiculous he was being, the Hobbit gave him a very pointed look. “One of which is the dragon that you *hired* me to face, might I add.” Thorin flinched at the reminder and Bilbo could see Balin cringing for Thorin from his seat.

“Also, it’s farming! Just because I will be venturing away from the Company, that doesn’t mean I will automatically be in some sort of danger.”

Thorin refused to let go and only shook his head stubbornly. Bilbo recognized the determined look on the Dwarven king’s face and knew that Thorin would not give in so easily.

Unbeknownst to everyone, Bard’s eyes had flickered between the Hobbit and the Dwarf during the exchange and suddenly, his face lit up in understanding. “Rest assured, your majesty, Master Baggins will be well looked after,” he offered gently. “Although King Thorin has a point, we are still in need of more workers.”

“I will not sit idly by and watch Bilbo perform this task alone,” Thorin said gravely and Bilbo sighed in relief when the Dwarf finally deigned to let go of his sleeve. He was starting to worry that the fabric would tear from the ferocious way Thorin had gripped it. “Also, the Men are right. Whether we like it or not, we no longer have the luxury that we once had to stand back and leave the food growing to our neighbours. As such,” Thorin stood up gracefully and pressed close to Bilbo, “I will be accompanying Bilbo in his…endeavour.”

Bilbo whirled around to face Thorin. *What.*

“What?” squawked Balin, followed by cries of uproar from the Iron Hills advisors. Even the Men looked surprised by the announcement.

“The King cannot be out there in the fields!” Borin exclaimed, scandalized.

“Oh Mahal, save me. Thorin, think of your decision, please!” Again, Balin cried out but Thorin steadfastly refused to acknowledge his friend.

Dáin drummed his fingers on the table and leaned back in his chair. He turned to the wide-eyed Frór and chirped out brightly, “Wow, this meeting just became so much more interesting!”

“Thorin, don’t be ridiculous. You have a kingdom to run. That should have a much higher priority than to defend me from the non-existing dangers of farming!” Bilbo pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

Thorin cocked his brow and crossed his arms over his chest. “Who said I am only there to defend you? As a king, I cannot expect any Dwarves to accept working as a food grower if their leader does nothing to show support. And what greater support is there than to see this leader working out there in the fields himself?” Then, he added defiantly and Bilbo suddenly understood *where* Fíli and Kíli learned to be difficult, “Also, perhaps I am using this opportunity to try my hand at a new hobby. My sister seems to enjoy this. I might as well find out why.”

“A new hobby?” *Oh what a crock of lies!* “You don’t even like plants and soil! I have seen how much loathing you had in your eyes for that ‘Soil Assessment Report’.”

“That is neither here nor there.” Thorin waved dismissively and Bilbo spluttered because Thorin was treating him as if *he* was the crazy one. “Still, one cannot deny the impact of leading by example. My presence in the fields will no doubt garner more interest among the Dwarves to voluntarily work on the farms.”

There was a brief moment of silence as everyone mulled over what was said.

“Well, if that is the case, count me in as well,” Dáin stood up to his advisors’ horror. “After all, we must present a united front to our people.” He gave a cheeky wink to Bilbo and Thorin and that seemed to be the straw that broke the camel’s back for the Dwarven advisors. Poor Frór looked like he was ready to keel over in a dead faint and Borin had turned deathly pale.

Meanwhile, Balin gave up all pretences at maintaining his composure and buried his face in his palms. Bilbo felt like he should do something to apologize for leading their king astray from the path of respectability and into the path of… farming.

When the old Dwarf finally looked up, Bilbo mouthed, ‘I’m so, so sorry!’ He hoped Balin would not secretly murder him in his sleep.

From across the table, Bard and the advisors from Dale could not look any more relieved at the turn of events. The three quickly got up and gave short, grateful bows in thanks. “You honour us with your generosity,” the new king of Dale replied sincerely. “As long as Dale continues to stand, you can always look towards us for help.”

And really, what else can anyone say against that?

“Great!” Dáin said with an air of finality and clapped his hands together. “So when can we start?”

Dear Mum,

WE HAVE BIG NEWS! Uncle will be helping the Men from Dale by working in the field as a food grower! A FOOD GROWER!

We heard that Bilbo, Uncle and Balin *(along with some of the Iron Hills Dwarves)* had a meeting with Bard the Bowman to discuss food-related issues and we wanted to know how their talk went, so Kíli and I decided to coax the

details out of our favourite Hobbit. *(It really wasn't that hard to get him talking, actually. We waited until Bilbo delivered us our lunch pies and started our conversation with, "So, about our Uncle –" and before we knew it, Bilbo had launched into a very impressive tirade about how Uncle Thorin is a stubborn Dwarf with skewed priorities.)* Apparently, Bard was asking if the Dwarves were willing to help in the farms and Bilbo volunteered, obviously. Because he's Bilbo and he's sweet like that. *(Also, he's a Hobbit and he likes gardening. You've seen the Hobbits, Mum so you must know exactly what we're talking about!)*

Bilbo wanted to go help and Uncle Thorin was like, "No. It's too dangerous! I will not let you stray far from my majestic presence because you are small and prone to danger! Let me love you, but from a closer distance!" *(I don't think Uncle actually said that, Fíli.)* It's close enough, don't worry about it! So Bilbo was like – *(wait! I want to be Bilbo!)* Okay fine, you can be Bilbo.

(So Bilbo said: "You must let go of me! I am going to go save the Men because I am heroically adorable and adorably heroic like that! Watch as I charm everyone I meet with my polite demeanour and pie!")

And Uncle, in turn, replied, "No! I will never let go of you! I am fully aware of your adorableness and your heroicness, but I could not stand it if someone were to come over and snatch you away from me, especially once you have offered them pie. After all, who can resist a man who brings them delicious pie? With you gone, who else can I give my longing looks and lingering touches to? This is most unacceptable!"

(Bilbo answered and probably while using his sad doe eyes, "I will be back to receive your longing looks and lingering touches! I'm only farming in a neighbouring town. Our love is strong enough to withstand the distance! Don't worry; I will only bring pie to your two wonderful, brilliant, handsome, genius nephews.")

But Uncle is not having it. "You're just one Hobbit, you will need assistance! If you persist in being stubborn, then you leave me with no choice. I am coming with you, but I will deny doing this for the sake of easing my own worries! Instead, I will use some other convenient excuse to justify my presence in the field! I shall tell everyone that me being there will encourage other Dwarves to work as food growers, thereby solving our current dilemma with the lack of farm workers! It will be like killing two birds with one stone! How majestically brilliant! I am majestically brilliant!"

(Bilbo, having understood all of that, said, "Don't be an idiot! You're a king. Your priority is to be a king! Secondly, don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. I know the real reason for you to be there is because you don't want me to get hurt, which is ridiculous because I can totally take care of myself! Don't you remember? I riddled with the dragon! I fought trolls and spiders! I freed you from the evil clutches of that tree-shagging Elvenking Thranduil!")

Uncle, being…well, uncle, retorted, "I have no idea what you're talking about. Also, I'm going. So there."

Then, Dáin jumped in and he totally supported Uncle's decision. All the Dwarven advisors had a coronary and Balin wept in a corner. The End.

If you ask Uncle, he will just give you some boring, watered down version of the events. You will agree that our story is much closer to the truth than anything he has to offer.

Love always,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 30 Dec., 2941

PS. We have started on our spy mission and we decided to keep a detailed account of the things we have observed. We shall send you a summarized version once the week is over.

PPS. Any news from the Blue Mountains? Please remember to watch your health!

To my two wonderfully imaginative sons who should be careful to never let their Uncle know what you think of him or else he will skin you both alive,

I agree, your delightful retelling of the meeting events will most likely prove to be much more insightful (and truthful) than your Uncle's. I will be asking him about it and I look forward to his version of the story, although I would have never predicted his…willingness to work with crops and all things related to plants and soil. My goodness, he must be really, really fond of Master Baggins.

Or it could be that Master Baggins is <u>especially</u> fantastic in the sack, which would not surprise me in the least if that were the case. It's always the sweet, adorable looking ones that prove to be the most…adventurous. I mean that in <u>every</u> sense of the word.

Oh stop cringing at me like that, boys! You should be happy that your Uncle has such a constant source of stress relief and distraction. How else could the both of you get away without sword practice for so long?

Yes, I know you haven't been practicing. No, it is not because I am psychic. The lack of whining in your letters is extremely telling. You and I know that your uncle would have immediately started your sparring sessions the moment you

both could crawl out of bed, injuries be damned, so be thankful for Bilbo Baggins' delightful presence and be sure to milk it for all its worth.

The Blue Mountains is the same as ever – peaceful, quiet, comfortable, and so utterly boring. If it weren't for my business, I would have languished under the lack of excitement a long time ago. Speaking of which, I have just received reports about the sales figures of my new line of spirits and things are looking fantastic. I am outselling my competitors (remember those snippity Elves and their fancy, sparkling fruit wines? Well, the Hobbits like the harder drinks. Mahal bless them for their good taste!)

Please pass my love and my deepest sympathy to Master Baggins. He will need it to face your Uncle's overbearing, overprotective presence in the coming days.

Lots of love,

Your mother

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

To my older brother Thorin who is not only an overbearing, judgemental, lying sod, but is also a hypocrite,

Do you hear that, Thorin? That's the sound of me giving you a slow handclap because I am so utterly impressed by your latest stint in the meeting room. What's this about you volunteering to be a food grower? As I recall, you have given me so much grief over the time and effort I spent on my own crops, I could have sworn that you wouldn't be caught dead working in the fields.

And look what we have here today.

Although I must say, I am extremely curious to know exactly what happened to have convinced you in doing farm work, of all things. Obviously, our delightful Master Baggins played a role into that decision – which begs my next question (of great importance):

So...just how good is Master Baggins in bed?

Love,

Your wonderful sister who is more than willing to forgive her brother if he gives her an honest retelling of what happened in that fateful meeting with the Men.

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

From Erebor, 2942

To my sister whom I will not be discussing certain, inappropriate topics with because they are horribly, horribly inappropriate,

How? How on Middle-Earth did you even hear about this news so quickly? On second thought, I don't want to know. I feel like it will give me peace of mind to remain oblivious to your crafty ways.

Sometimes, ignorance is bliss and this is one of those times.

As for my decision to voluntarily work as a food grower, I have done so in hopes of encouraging other Dwarves to work in the fields. Bard informed myself and Dáin of the dire situation regarding the shortage of farm workers and it was decided that the Dwarves cannot sit back and do nothing. Simply put, the only option we have left is to provide help in the fields, or both Men and Dwarves can expect to starve together. Dáin and I agreed that the preservation of our people is paramount to everything else. I am certain that you will agree with this as well, dear sister.

Rest assured, Bilbo Baggins will be joining me as well. His expertise will more than make up for the…lack of mine and our men. The plants and the soil seem to speak to the Hobbit in ways that the metals of the mountain do to us Dwarves so I know that we are in good hands. Master Baggins was the first to volunteer to help the Men, and I must confess that his actions were a catalyst in making me realize what I had to do. I cannot in good conscience send him to work alone while I sit by and do nothing from a distance.

The rest of the meeting was spent discussing different crops, harvesting time, and other future plans for the farms. You will be happy to know that the barley and wheat seeds you have sent were met with enthusiasm (especially from the Hobbit. I have never seen his eyes light up like that) and the seeds will be introduced to the spring crop. I shall provide you with updates once we have done more in the fields.

- Thorin

PS. Aside from pointing out how horribly inappropriate it is to be asking your question of great importance, I would like to (again) mention that Master Baggins and I are not lovers. I do not understand your fascination with our relationship,

but no, there is no secret love affair or whatever love story settings you have envisioned us in. We are not characters on those romance novels that you are secretly so fond of, those annoying ones who will always inevitably fall in love.

To my brother who is secretly dying to know how I know so much about him, but his pride is making him say otherwise, (but I know better. I always do),

I am actually surprised that Dáin got behind your suggestion. If I remember correctly, the Dwarf is pleasant enough to deal with, but he has always given me the impression of a snake in the grass. Ultimately, he will do what benefits him the most. I would be wary of him, brother and let us hope that his willingness to help is due to a genuine desire to see Erebor restored. Personally, I think it's because he would like to receive a portion of that treasure in compensation and probably thinks that his help will put him in your good graces. If that is the case, I would gladly pay him after this whole mess is settled and happily part ways with him.

While your actions to volunteer as a farm worker are honourable, be prepared to be shepherded away by Dwalin after doing very minimal work. Surely, you cannot honestly expect the Dwarves to let you flounder pathetically in the fields? It will undoubtedly be as painful for you as it is for them to watch. It's best if you stand back and let Master Baggins do what he does best before you humiliate yourself in your incompetence.

Another word of caution, brother – there will be those who will oppose your decision in sending Dwarves to work in the farm lands. Brace yourself and your Hobbit for some potential backlash. If you're worried about Master Baggins's safety, have one of the Company Members (or someone trustworthy) to guard him when you are unable.

Be careful! Don't you dare die on me now, at least not until you buy me a drink for all the grief you have caused me!

Love always (even when there are plenty of times that you don't deserve it.)

Your sister

PS. No, you two are much more idiotic than the characters from those love stories. By the way, I know you enjoy those as much as I do, don't deny it! I have caught you secretly reading 'The Eternal Love of Fulla and Buri' in your room on multiple occasions so I do not appreciate your derision. Just for that, I will make it my personal mission to write a love story between you and Master Baggins and I will title it as 'The Inevitable Love Story between Two Idiots', or something similar just to see you grind your teeth. How do you like me now?

Fíli and Kíli's Super Secret Awesome Spy Report #2

Targets: Uncle and Mr. Bilbo Baggins (as always! Although Ori and Dwalin are acting a bit funny too and we may or may not want to look in on them sometime in the near future.)

Goal: To uncover any suspicious activities (ie. hot, Dwarf on Hobbit action) between the two aforementioned targets and to tell mother about it because she is extremely emotionally invested in all of this. It is better not to ask why.

Impact of mission if successful:

Same as the ones listed before except with modification to point #5. It was previously listed as –

"May potentially leave mission with a few more mental scars and highly unpleasant images if we catch them in suspicious, compromising positions. (Note: Ask Óin if he has a potion to block out unpleasant, trauma-inducing thoughts.)"

There has been an update to this! We have spoken extensively with Óin in hopes of finding said potion. *(He gave us this disturbing funny look before bending over and guffawing until tears were literally streaming from his face. When he was able to regain his composure, he said to us, "So, they're finally at it, eh?"*

What was that even suppose to mean?)

By the way, we never even got our potion. I don't think it even exists, which is absolutely terrible since it meant that we had wasted 15 minutes of our time, standing there and watching Óin laugh. It looks like we will have to make do with the risk of irreparable damage to our delicate psyches if we end up seeing something that we really don't want to. Thanks a lot for that, Óin. *(Yeah, thanks for a whole lot of nothing you have provided us with except for that unhelpful cryptic message!)*

Day 2

Meeting time duration: Afternoon, one o'clock until three o'clock

Summary of events: Snuck out of the mess hall after lunch when we saw Bilbo skulking away with a platter of food, but not before grabbing a few dinner rolls, sausages, apples and pastries. *(We remembered to bring food for our stakeout this time! See? We're learning from experience!)*

Followed Bilbo until he reached Uncle's tent but on our way there, we had to duck and dive multiple times behind random objects to avoid being recognized. In retrospect, we knew where Bilbo was going and we could have simply taken a shortcut to beat him there, but Kíli and I were really, really bored. *(We also wanted to practice our sneaking abilities in case if we needed to catch Ori again and stop him from pulling those spymaster tricks of his. It was downright embarrassing how quickly we lost him that time we chased him.)* Who would have guessed that under his innocent demeanour, his shy smiles, and those cute purple ribbons in his plaits lay a Dwarf with extreme stealth abilities that could even give Bilbo's a run for his money?

We reached our stake-out point *(ie. the apple crates that no longer smelled like apples. Fíli was disappointed. I can tell)* and proceeded to settle in for what would be a long couple of hours. Fifteen minutes into our wait, Kíli and I realized that we still had our food with us. We decided to have a long, meaningful discussion on how to best ration certain foods when we were clearly on a mission of unknown length. *(We argued over what to eat first. Fíli wanted to go for the pies while they were still fresh but obviously, I knew better! I suggested that we should finish the sausages before they got cold, since cold sausages were just a horribly tragic and unnecessary waste of perfectly cooked meat!)*

Unfortunately, we never got to finish that discussion. Dwalin, having apparently heard us, rudely interrupted our conversation by hauling Kíli into the air by the collar of his jacket. *(All that talk about food was making me hungry and I was winning that argument too!)* Dwalin, being the overly suspicious and fun-killing Dwarf that he was, squinted at us and brusquely asked what we were doing there. Mother would be proud to know that neither Kíli nor I told him anything, even when he started shaking Kíli from the scruff of his collars like a bedraggled, misbehaving kitten. *(Hey! I resent being called bedraggled!)* Not the point, Kíli.

Luckily, I noticed something odd and blurted out, at the right time I might add. "Dwalin, are those new? I have never seen you wear those gloves before!"

(I twisted as best as I could while still in the air, which was a pretty impressive act of athleticism I must admit, to see what Fíli was on about. Fíli was right! Dwalin was wearing a new pair of knitted dark brown fingerless gloves…ones that looked awfully familiar. Obviously, I had to point that out and said, "Hey! Those look like Ori's! Why did he knit you things and didn't make us any? Why are you getting preferential treatment? That's so unfair!" Because if Ori was going around making people things, then I might as well ask him to make me something too! I always wanted a scarf.)

The strangest thing happened next; Dwalin flushed. He honest to Mahal flushed. And then he dropped Kíli and started shouting loudly at us to mind our own business…which was the last thing we wanted since he had created enough noise for Uncle to come storming out of his tent with Bilbo in tow. *(Neither of them looked particularly dishevelled either. Looks like they weren't busy making the beast with two backs.)* Before Dwalin could open his big mouth and blow our cover, Kíli and I beat him to it by politely telling Uncle that we were simply complimenting Dwalin on his new gloves *(the ones that Ori made for him and look how fetching they are on Dwalin! Ori must have spent a lot of time planning and making such a thoughtful gift)* but for some reason, we got yelled at for our troubles.

Uncle did not say anything. He looked at Dwalin's gloves, then at Dwalin's face *(I almost feel bad for Dwalin too. He was spluttering quite a bit)* and Uncle…smirked a mean, smug little smirk. Dwalin just growled out, "Not. One. Word," before turning dramatically on his heel and storming away.

Now that our scapegoat had left, we found ourselves the focus of our Uncle's *(terrifying)* attention. He gave us each a look over and said, "Fíli, Kíli, it looks like you both have recovered enough to be running around, tormenting others. I guess there wouldn't be any issues if we were to start on our sparring sessions again."

At that point, we thought that saving our own skins was much more important and decided to abandon our mission a little early. *(I don't think I ever ran away so fast. Good thing Bilbo was there to hold Uncle back!)*

Surely, Mother will understand.

Note to self for next stake-out: Don't get caught. Bring more food, but be sure to remember to eat the sausages first. If we see Dwalin, compliment his gloves *(loudly!)* as a distraction.

We shall continue to update this report as we progress.

- Fíli and Kíli

Notes:

A/N: Next Chapter – more stuff of importance will happen since not all is well in the Dwarven camps. Also, things will start to spiral a bit out of control. Just a bit. Hurhurhurhur.

Thank you very much to everyone who read, reviewed/commented, kudosed, favourited, bookmarked (and etc.) I do notice every last bit of that so thank you so much for all of your support, no matter how you've shown it! As usual,

reviews are greatly appreciated and I always try my best to answer them (unless you're on ffnet and you commented as an anon. In that case, sorry! I have no way to get back to you!)

Notes about this chapter:

[1] I definitely took a lot of liberties with writing Dáin. In this fic, I've portrayed him as a Dwarf who goes out of his way to showcase an openly happy, joyous front, but it's always the 'nice' guys that you have to keep your eyes out on. His motives are not all that altruistic…but don't believe every word that Dís says either. She's not always 100% right.

[2] The names Frór and Borin were taken from the Poetic Edda, which was one of the sources Tolkien used for his Dwarven names.

[3] Tension among the Dwarven camp will definitely make itself known from Thorin's radical decision. Then again, Thorin knows that as a ruler, you can't please everyone. Someone will always end up unhappy.

[4] Here's something interesting I found on wiki – the word Dís, in Norse mythology, is a "ghost associated with fate who can be both benevolent and antagonistic towards mortal people", which describes her actions towards Thorin to a tee.

According to a very interesting reviewer response from Quillicous: 'dis' is more accurately translated as 'lady' or 'goddess'. The female elves of Norse mythology were described as 'dises of light' and the actual goddesses of the mythology as dises as well.

So there you go. Knowledge bomb to the face.

Until next time! :)

Chapter 5 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1401232)

Notes:

Betaed by toraberushimeri from tumblr. Many thanks for her hard work!
You can follow me at tumblr: bgtea.tumblr.com. I tend to post previews of the latest chapter so if you're interested, you can go check that out. :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_5_endnotes) .)

VII. (Not quite) Thorin

Fíli and Kíli's Super Secret Awesome Spy Report #3 and #4

Note: We forgot to write them separately so we might as well write them altogether now before we forget again.

Targets: Uncle and Mr. Bilbo Baggins, but we're also tentatively keeping our eyes out for Ori and Dwalin because something seriously fishy is going on. *(I have never seen Dwalin look so…shifty around Ori, especially since the aftermath of the Glove Incident. It's bizarre and deeply unsettling.)*

Goal: To continue surveying the going-ons between Uncle and Bilbo, especially when they're having their secret rendez-vous at their love nest. *(Ew, Fíli. Now, I will never be able to walk into Uncle's tent without forgetting that you called it a 'love nest'. Just ewwww.)*

Impact of mission if successful:

Same as always, although with a new addition –

6. We could use it to distract Dwalin from us. Ever since the Glove Incident, he has been glowering at us from a distance, quietly plotting his revenge. You can see it in his eyes…and from the way he sharpens his knives without breaking eye contact with us. *(I'm more disturbed that he doesn't need to blink at all.)* I know, it's unnerving. Maybe we can throw Ori at him and run in the other direction. Ori seems to be a nice, calming influence on him.

Day 3

Meeting time duration: Late afternoon, four o'clock until six o'clock

Summary of events:

Bilbo came into our tents to deliver our afternoon pies and to scold at us for teasing Dwalin the other day. Apparently, what goes on between him and Ori is nobody else's business except for theirs'. *(Remember the look he gave you when you asked him, "And what's going on between Dwalin and Ori exactly?")* You mean that look of incredulousness, as if he

couldn't believe we had just asked him that? Yeah, that look was a bit uncalled for! It was a genuine question and I wanted to know what he was on about! *(Well, he never answered us anyway. He just rolled his eyes, threw his hands up and left. Do you think we can wheedle it out of him later?)* Better not. Uncle will hear about this and would murder us in his over protective rage. *(Dwalin will probably help him too, because he's a mean sod like that).*

We finished our pies, detoured to the kitchen to grab some snacks – no sausages nor pies this time, just food that can be eaten cold so that Kíli won't whine about eating certain things first – and snuck our way to Uncle Thorin's tent. *(We found a new place to hide. This time, we chose to set up our stake out point by the neighbouring striped tent, behind a couple of conveniently placed, empty barrels. It gave us the perfect vantage point and more importantly, if Dwalin comes sniffing, we can make an easy getaway)*. We're so smart. Sometimes, we surprise even ourselves with our own cleverness.

Just as we made ourselves comfortable (*we finished laying out our picnic spread, it was glorious*), we saw Bilbo rounding the corner and enter Uncle's tent without pause. (*Well obviously. Bilbo's been in there so often now that he doesn't even realize how automatic his movements are.*) Likewise, Uncle hasn't made a fuss about Bilbo barging in on him. He must be pleased with the way the Hobbit regularly returns to their love nest. (*Ewww, Fíli. Could you stop using that description?!)* Oh come on. It's not that bad! Oh, stop giving me those eyes, just – fine! Fine, I'll stop using that, you whiny brat.

While we waited, we ate, we took turns napping a little (*we ate too much. The food made us sleepy*), and finally, we succumbed to our desperate boredom and decided to play a guessing game. *(One of us would hum a tune and the other would guess the name of the song)*.

Of course, that could have gone a lot better if Kíli wasn't such a dirty, cheating cheat! (*Fíli was a horrible sore loser and couldn't stand it because I literally trounced him at his own game.)* The <u>only</u> reason you kept winning was because I could actually carry a tune for you to accurately guess the song I was singing! You, on the other hand, were so unbelievably horrible that there was no way anyone could have figured out what you were even humming! You literally cheated your way into victory through self-sabotage! *(Hey! I didn't need to fake my way into being this bad! I'll have you know that it is all natural skill on my part, or the lack thereof, so there!)*

(Wait, that's not something to be proud of, is it? Huh.)

Just as we were debating on whether Kíli should be penalized, things began to get…strange in the tent. We were interrupted by what sounded like loud bouts of angry shouting between Uncle and Bilbo. Whatever was going on lasted for quite a while before Bilbo stormed out of the tent, looking absolutely furious. We caught up to him and tried to ask what was wrong, but all we managed to get from him was: "Go and ask that difficult Dwarven king of your Uncle! I am getting a cup of tea or so help me, Eru!"

Looks like not all is well in paradise. More investigation is needed.

<u>Day 4</u>

Meeting time duration: Afternoon, one o'clock until three o'clock

Summary of events:

It wasn't until a couple of days after their argument that Bilbo went back into Uncle's tent. We tried to get him to talk but our Hobbit could be surprisingly resilient when he wanted to. *(We still have no idea what really happened, aside from the obvious fact that Bilbo and Uncle had a very loud disagreement.)*

Uncle was absolutely miserable to be around with when Bilbo stopped visiting. He spent a lot of time moping in his tent, glaring at anyone who deemed to enter his sanctuary and disturb his epic, majestic sulk, especially when they do things like…bringing him his meals, supplying him with medicine, and you know, doing other tasks that were meant to keep him alive. The very next day, he stormed out of his tent to the mess hall, spent his lunch glaring across the table at Bilbo *(who very casually ignored his presence)*, and then stomped back to his tent to sulk after realizing that he had been thoroughly ignored. An hour later, he changed his mind, and dragged me and Kíli out into the field for sword practice. I don't think I have been so thoroughly trounced in a sparring session, not since we were children and we were still getting used to holding our swords properly. *(I know what you mean, Fíli. I think I screamed like a little girl when Uncle came charging at me like a great, big, majestic, rabid bear. I also think that the reason I wasn't murdered was either because I was still wearing my sling or my blood curling scream snapped him out of his homicidal rage.)* It was probably your scream that threw him off. I didn't even know your voice could go that high!

Thank goodness for Dwalin. When he finally stepped in, I could have kissed the Dwarf out of gratefulness. *(Just thinking about the whole experience made my bruises ache all over. You know that the sparring session was a bad one when even <u>Dwalin</u> gave us a look of pity. Dwalin, the Dwarf who has a reputation for drinking the blood of his enemies out of their skulls while sitting on a chair upholstered by their skin.)* Dwalin, the fearsome warrior who bathes in the tears of lesser men because normal water is reserved for plebeians.

(Dwalin, who can roundhouse kick a cow and cheese will come squirting out of its udders.)

Dwalin, who can kill two birds with one stone while killing two stones with one bird! That's right, not even inanimate objects are safe from his mighty, beefy fists of fury.

Note to self – must come up with more Dwalin jokes. Ori would probably like them given his newfound obsession with the Dwarf.

And speaking of Dwalin, at least he went easy on us. *(Good ol' Dwalin! That is why he is my favourite…after Ori and Bilbo, of course.)*

On the morning of the second day after The Fight, we finally convinced Bilbo *(read: begged him pitifully by latching on to his knees and refusing let go)* to visit Uncle again. He agreed and as usual, we secretly followed him to his meeting. For once, we did our duty flawlessly and we waited quietly by the barrels. *(We completely forgot to grab some food in our mad dash to follow Bilbo and we weren't carrying anything that could remotely keep us entertained. I was bored to tears. Fíli nodded off a couple of times and I had to keep shaking him awake. Eventually, I just gave up and let him sleep. At least he was leaning on my good shoulder and he was keeping me warm.)*

After what seemed like forever, we were jolted into awareness by Bilbo leaving the tent in a huff. To our surprise, Uncle quickly followed him this time *(his face in obvious distress and his hair free flowing in the wind…It was all very dramatic)* and like a hero chasing after his long lost love, he grabbed Bilbo by his elbow, spun him around and held him desperately in his arms. Bilbo struggled for a bit. *(He barely did! He wiggled a few times and pretty much sank into Uncle's embrace. It was the most pathetic attempt at escape I have ever seen. He clearly wasn't even trying!)* Well, clearly! As I was saying, Bilbo struggled for a bit but he gave up when Uncle bent down to whisper something softly into his ear. It was all horribly sweet and romantic, especially with the way Bilbo just wilted at Uncle's obviously apologetic move and Uncle looking so relieved at being forgiven. *(Not to mention how they had just clung on to each other for a while without doing anything else.)* Why, oh why did Mum want us to witness all this anyway? She's punishing us isn't she? Well, it's cruel and unusual, that's what this is!

What's even more surprising was when Uncle pulled away. I thought that they were going to snog the living daylight out of each other, but nothing happened. *(It all ended rather anti-climatically didn't it? They went back into the tent and a few minutes later, Bilbo left and like always, he wasn't the least bit dishevelled. It makes me wonder if Uncle and Bilbo even realize what they're doing to each other.)*

Oh, by the Makers.

Kíli, what if…they don't realize this thing that's going on between them?

(That's ridiculous. How can they not? It's so obvious! Maybe the Hobbit is just shy or something.)

Either way, Mother will be pleased to know that there has been some development, although clearly, they have not done the dirty deeds under the sheet. *(Ewwww, Fíli!)*

Well, until next time!

- Fíli and Kíli

Thorin should have known that the peace between himself and Bilbo would not last. *Still*, he thought hopelessly and with no small degree of frustration as he stared at Bilbo's glowering figure from across his tent, *I was hoping for at least a day or two more of civility*.

"Bilbo," he tried for what felt like the umpteenth time to be patient, but he knew he was mostly failing from the way that the Hobbit's spine had stiffened even further, "I did not believe you were taking enough precaution with your safety, especially with the regular way you run about the camp. I was only trying to rectify that."

At Bilbo's indignant expression, he interjected quickly before his friend could deliver a litany of complaints, "Yes, I know that you're wearing the mithril chain mail and that you're carrying your sword around at all times. I also know that you will not hesitate to use your magic ring to escape. However, I would rather you not be using those items to begin with!"

Bilbo crossed his arms and scowled viciously, "And you think having a small fleet of guards tailing me wherever I go is a reasonable solution, especially when you have assigned them to me without first telling me?"

Thorin rolled his eyes at the Hobbit's melodrama and fought to keep his temper at bay. May Durin give him the patience to deal with stubborn Hobbits. "If that is what it takes to keep you safe, then yes, yes it is," he sniped back. "And six guards hardly make up a fleet!"

Bilbo made a small noise of disbelief in the back of his throat and spluttered angrily, "Of all the things I said, 'six are not a fleet' is the only thing you could come up with?! Six are – ", he closed his eyes, snapped his mouth closed, and took a deep steadying breath while bringing two fingers to rub his temple in a desperate motion. Thorin slowly inched towards his friend, feeling marginally guilty, but was left hovering from his spot nearby at the Hobbit's heated glare. After a brief

moment, Bilbo gritted out, “You know what, that is not the point here. The point is how you keep making decisions for me all for the sake of keeping me safe. I would very much like to know what’s going on *before* I end up with six guards following my every move and four guarding my tent!”

He opened his eyes and gave Thorin a stern glare, “Thorin, this is getting out of control! And it all started with that…” he grasped uselessly for the right word, “that *thing* with the farming –”

Thorin frowned deeply, “I am coming with you and I refuse to hear anything about it –”

“Exactly! This thing right here!” Bilbo snapped and waved his hand pointedly at Thorin, “This thing that you’re doing right now at this very instant, with the constant hovering and how you just insert yourself!” He threw his hands up and Thorin instinctively leaned away to avoid getting hit in the face. “Look, I know that you’re afraid, but don’t you think that all this is a bit much?”

“This is not about me being afraid! This is about you underestimating the dangers that are out there!” Thorin’s eyes blazed and he ignored the pang of hurt from Bilbo’s words. “Not everyone in the camp is our friend, Bilbo! People who do not like my decision about sending Dwarves to the farms will find ways to hurt me and you are a target!”

Thorin may have spent long years as an exile, but he was raised in the Ereborean court as a prince and he had been taught to constantly watch out for being stabbed in the back. He remembered the complicated games the nobles would play in their desperate attempts to gain his grandfather’s favour, how one moment, they would be whispering sweet, honeyed words in each other's ears and the next, they would be lunging viciously for the other’s throat for a chance to gain more money and power. Luckily, Thorin himself had mostly been spared from the convoluted mind-games of the courtiers. As the oldest grandson to King Thrór, his position as heir to the throne was secured in stone and most would not risk crossing him. The most he had to deal with were the frequent Dwarves who wished to use his support to further their own means but often times, his large entourage acted as deterrents against them.

He did not have the same luxury now as he had then. Separated from his loyal supporters in the Blue Mountains (save for the handful that made up his Company) and surrounded by soldiers whose loyalty was, first and foremost, to their Lord Dáin, Thorin knew that he held his position as King under the Mountain precariously. The only thing keeping him safe at the moment was the Dwarves’ stubborn hold on tradition that the direct descendant of Durin to remain as Erebor’s ruler, but with the allure of the mountain’s riches, Thorin did not doubt that many Dwarves’ conviction would be severely tested. *Especially those who would gain the most from Dáin being king of the Lonely Mountain,* the Dwarven king thought bitterly.

Dís’ warning-filled letter had only further cemented his doubts about his cousin from the Iron Hills and in response to his sister’s words, Thorin had called for a secret meeting with the Company members to discuss the potential threats in the coming days. He then asked Balin and Dwalin to provide him an updated list of Dwarves with past connections to Erebor, those who could be trusted to want Thorin on the throne. From that meagre list, Thorin had carefully selected Bilbo’s guards.

Despite these steps of precaution, it was obvious that they were woefully, hilariously outnumbered in the camp. Thorin can only hope that his new alliance with Bard could be depended on in the face of a coup d'état.

The fear and panic must have shown in Thorin’s eyes for the Hobbit relaxed his stance and sighed in resignation. He ran his fingers distractedly through his hair and said quietly, “I just don’t understand how out of everyone in the Company, I’m the one who merits ten guards. I’m probably the least important person here.” The weariness was present in his voice and it was obvious that Bilbo was as sick and tired of fighting as Thorin.

The Hobbit wrapped his arms around himself and added matter-of-factly, “Besides, if anyone were to be targeted, I’d imagine it would be someone like Balin or your heirs. All I have done was talk about soil types and plants.”

Thorin snorted. That was the most ridiculous thing he had heard anyone say. Did Bilbo honestly not see his own worth?

“You? Unimportant? Nothing could be further from the truth,” he said sincerely and frowned deeply at Bilbo’s answering nonchalant shrug. No, this was unacceptable. Thorin will not allow his Hobbit to continue thinking so little of himself. “I cannot begin to describe all the help you have given me, all that I owe you. You are one of my most trusted advisors whose insights I deeply count on.” When the Hobbit looked away with his cheeks flushed, the Dwarf continued heatedly, “You are important, Bilbo Baggins! I see it and the others do too when I brought you alongside Balin to that meeting with Bard.”

Thorin laid his hands over Bilbo’s shoulders and he marvelled at how easily the Hobbit’s frame had fit between his palms. He pressed himself closer to Bilbo and lowered his voice to a murmur, “I’m afraid that I have unwillingly made you a worthy target by asking for your help. I wish that wasn’t the case and I apologize for all the trouble this will cause.”

Bilbo let out a breathless little chuckle and gave Thorin a lopsided grin. “I’m afraid it’s a bit too late for that. You Dwarves have brought me nothing but trouble ever since that first day you lot showed up at my doorstep in Bag-End.” He closed his eyes and sighed deeply, enjoying the feel of Thorin’s strong hands that held him protectively. That was the

problem wasn't it? It was much too easy to cling to the Dwarven king and bask in his warmth, knowing full well that one cannot find a better or more willing shield against the harsh realities that lay outside of the tent. But as much as Bilbo craved safety, he could not let Thorin act completely on his behalf. His pride, for one, would never allow it.

"Look, I appreciate all that you have done, I really do. But if you remember how we first met, I really don't do well with surprises," Bilbo said evenly, a self-deprecating smile on his lips. "Could you at least run the plans for my security details by me before putting them in place?"

He continued, feeling bold now that understanding had finally reached Thorin's eyes, "I still think that I have too many guards posted. We're shorthanded enough as it is. Surely, we can free up some of those Dwarves instead of wasting able-bodied workers like that? I for one feel that having all those Dwarves guarding my tent is unnecessary."

Thorin gently dropped his hands from Bilbo's shoulders to let them rest casually at his side. "Perhaps I was a bit too hasty in assigning you those guards without letting you know in advance. I apologize for that," he conceded gruffly. At Bilbo's slow, answering smile, he scowled, "However, I do not think that it is a waste if the Dwarves are keeping you safe through the night. How else could we be sure that nothing will happen to you when you sleep?"

A few seconds of silence passed in the tent as Bilbo and Thorin paused to think.

"I can always sleep over at someone else's tent?" Bilbo asked in a hesitant voice. "I just need to find someone with enough…space…"

He trailed off and his expression suddenly lit up. He twisted around from his spot on the floor, eyes frantically roving in every direction in the tent before throwing a wide, mischievous grin at the Dwarf. Thorin gulped.

This will not bode well.

"Well then, Thorin," Bilbo practically beamed. "If you don't mind, I will need your help to move your cot closer to the left side of the tent."

"What?" Thorin asked dumbly but he has a feeling that he knew where this was heading.

Bilbo's grin morphed into what Thorin could only describe as a look of pure evil. "I will be bunking here, of course!" He gestured at the space around him with both his arms.

Thorin stared blankly at the Hobbit. "You are moving into my tent," he repeated slowly, trying to process *how* this has happened but cannot for the life of him understand the Hobbit's brand of insanity. "I just – wait, what? No, no you may not!"

"Yes, I may, and I just did." Bilbo crossed his arms and cocked his brow, "What seems to be the problem? I think it's a waste of Dwarves to have them guard my tent at night, Dwarves who, need I remind you, were assigned to me without my say. You, on the other hand, don't want me to be unguarded at night. If I were to stay here, I can get rid of the guards and you won't have to worry about me getting attacked in my sleep. This is the perfect solution to our disagreement."

Then, the Hobbit unceremoniously reached over and dragged the still spluttering Dwarf towards the cot and the next thing Thorin knew, he was holding up one end of his bed and was automatically shifting the frame closer to the wall, just like Bilbo had wanted.

"I cannot believe you had the gall to invite yourself like that," Thorin grumbled when his wit had finally caught up to him some odd minutes later. "What happened to your Hobbit manners and sensibilities?"

"I have no idea what you're on about," Bilbo answered glibly. He casually bent down to deposit his end of the cot's frame to the floor. "Didn't you see how politely I had announced my move into your tent? I did so without raising my voice or threatening you at sword point. I was an exemplary gentlehobbit." He brushed his hands over his trousers to get rid of the dust and ignored Thorin's scoff. "Besides, I just need a place to sleep. However," Bilbo looked up at the Dwarven king with quiet uncertainty, "if you really don't want me here, I don't mind going to someone else's tent."

A flare of dark, unnamed emotion immediately rose in Thorin's gut, its intensity catching him by surprise. The idea of Bilbo choosing to stay close to another Dwarf made him feel physically ill, one that Thorin cannot find it in him to accept.

"No, that is unnecessary," he said in a rush. He cleared his throat, shifting his gaze awkwardly to avoid making eye contact with Bilbo. "You can stay. It is only fair that you get to decide what to do after how I have inconvenienced you."

And just as suddenly, Thorin had a terribly brilliant idea as well. "You may stay, but on one condition," he corrected.

Bilbo furrowed his brows, "What is it?"

Thorin tilted his head towards the piles of paperwork that had buried his desk. "You, my dear Master Baggins, get the honour of helping me with this." He walked past the Hobbit, whose eyes had widened in shock at the sight, and clapped him enthusiastically on the shoulder.

"Look alive, Master Baggins. Look alive!"

The ensuing groan was like music to his ears.

Later, after they had managed to fit Bilbo's cot on the opposite side of Thorin's tent and had settled down to work, Thorin would secretly agree that Bilbo's decision to move in was a rather brilliant one. For one, the Hobbit was exceptionally good at paper work.

"Another form detailing the types of crops that Dale expect to send over. It needs your signature at the bottom here to show that you agree." Bilbo held out the paper for Thorin to pluck from his hand without pausing in his reading. "And I thought that the Dwarves like their contracts. It looks like the Men from Dale are equally as fond of them, judging by the sheer volume of these things that you have to sign."

Thorin casually reached back to grab the form from Bilbo's hand without leaving his seat. "We Dwarves like our contracts because they enable efficiency in our projects." Thorin answered distractedly while quickly skimming over the words on his newly acquired document. "The Men from Dale, in contrast, like contracts because of their sick, perverse love of all things involving more paperwork." He frowned and squinted at the text, "I'm pretty sure I signed this already. Why are there two of the same documents?"

"Nope," the Hobbit drawled, "the one you signed was 'Project Green Dale, Crops Listing Version 3.3'. This is 'Project Green Dale, Crops Listing Version 3.4'. You will find that this new form has the slight but very important correction where it has re-categorized tomatoes as 'fruits' instead of 'vegetables'."

Thorin made a noise of frustration and tossed the document on his desk. "Why does it even matter if a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable? Couldn't they have just put everything together into one massive list and save us all the hassle instead?"

"Like you said: sick, perverse love of paperwork." Bilbo yawned and stretched until his back cracked. "You know, I always imagined that kings would lead a much more glorious life than this." The Hobbit wrinkled his nose in disgust at the slowly dwindling pile of paper on his desk. "Do you suppose that Fíli and Kíli know what's in store for them?"

Thorin coughed awkwardly, "I try to focus on the more positive aspects of ruling with my nephews to keep them from being intimidated…what?" He paused when he noticed Bilbo's look of scepticism.

Bilbo raised an eyebrow at Thorin. "So basically, what you're saying is that you omit the part about spending hours behind a desk, doing tedious work so that they won't try to abdicate in a desperate attempt to save their own skins."

Thorin's face was washed with red. "I'm not…that is…well," Thorin floundered. "Maybe?"

The two looked quietly at each other until Bilbo burst unashamedly into laughter. Thorin scowled.

"Maybe! That's horrible Thorin!"

"Oh stop that! I am only looking out for the best interest of everyone involved."

"No, you are looking out for your own best interest by sparing yourself from a Fíli and Kíli induced headache," Bilbo bluntly pointed out, still sounding entirely too amused for Thorin. "What will Dís say if she finds out?"

"She wouldn't have to say anything because this was her plan to begin with," Thorin retorted miserably. "Technically, I haven't omitted anything per se. I *do* let them attend to a lot of my meetings."

"Yes, but how many times have they had to sit by your bureau and trudge through all these documents with you?"

Thorin's pinched expression was enough to trigger a fresh bout of laughter from Bilbo.

"You are horrible, Thorin," Bilbo repeated, still chuckling lightly. "Sooner or later, your nephews will have this figured out and they will retaliate by making your life a living *hell*. When that happens, I will be there to tell you, 'I told you so.'"

Thorin rolled his eyes and countered, "Not for a very long while if I can help it. I'm afraid you'll just have to stay in Erebor for a few more decades if you want that satisfaction."

"Why, I'm only welcomed for a few more decades?" Bilbo teased, his tone light and his eyes still bright from the tears of laughter, "I am hurt and insulted! I might just take my leave right here and now!"

Thorin found himself choking unexpectedly on air. Even though he knew Bilbo was joking, he had never given a serious thought to Bilbo Baggins *leaving,* and having the Hobbit speak of it so flippantly had left his chest feeling tight. It's not as if Bilbo had ever brought up plans to return to the Shire either, what with Dís's promise of keeping Bag-End safe. The Hobbit had seemed happy enough to stay and help Thorin on his restoration projects, but then again, Bilbo had never explicitly said how long he would be staying either. This realization filled Thorin with a sudden, cold sense of dread. What if he was wrong in his naïve assumption that Bilbo was staying?

Was Bilbo planning on going when the farms are established? Or maybe even before that? Thorin could not bear the idea of seeing his friend's retreating figure with each step he takes away from Erebor, *away from Thorin*. Mahal knows how long they will even see each other again, if ever.

"No! You can't leave now," Thorin said a little too desperately and Bilbo's eyes widened at the honest panic on his face. Realizing that he might have revealed too much, Thorin forced himself to relax and joked weakly, "What shall I do without my advisor and my food smuggler? I foresee a slow, painful death by starvation or by being crushed underneath all this paperwork." He smiled shakily, "I also think Fíli and Kíli will throw a tremendous fit if their pie supplier up and leaves."

“Oh Thorin,” Bilbo breathed, staring helplessly at the Dwarf. The Hobbit got up from his chair, walked up to Thorin and, to the Dwarf’s growing surprise, pressed his forehead against the king’s in a move so achingly familiar and so full of affection that Thorin was left powerless to do anything else but to sink into his hold. Bilbo snaked his hands around the Dwarf and gently cupped the back of Thorin’s head to support his craning neck, bringing the two together even closer and Thorin, who was already swimming in the heady warmth and the spicy scent that could only belong to Bilbo Baggins, closed his eyes and exhale shakily.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Bilbo murmured softly and like magic, Thorin felt the coiled tension in his chest finally start to loosen. His hands that were left clutching tightly at the fabric on his lap slowly relaxed, letting his fingers unfurl.

“Good,” Thorin whispered back, “I would hate to see you go.” He kept his eyes shut so that he could commit to memory the feel of Bilbo’s slim fingers carding through his hair and the warmth of soft skin where they remained touching. He wanted desperately to reach up and hold the Hobbit, and the thought of his large hands spreading across Bilbo’s hips was enough to send a dark, possessive thrill through him.

Thorin frowned and snapped his eyes open in shock. Where did this need to *possess* the Hobbit come from?

His thoughts from what felt like a lifetime ago suddenly came rushing back to him –

I would rule Erebor happily as long as Bilbo Baggins stays.

Oh, Thorin thought dazedly, finally making sense of the swirling emotions that were clouding his head. He must have subconsciously realized a long time ago that Bilbo brings him a very rare sense of happiness and peace, and like all Dwarves, he reacted instinctively to safeguard the rare things in his life. It was only natural then for Thorin to cling so fiercely to his friend if it meant he got to preserve those rare feelings.

Satisfied with his rationalization on his uncharacteristic clinginess, Thorin relaxed into a smile and let his eyes slip shut again. See? There was a *perfectly* logical explanation to his odd behaviour. It was just his Dwarf side taking over.

It would be much, much later when he realized just how wrong he was.

VIII. Nori

To the untrained eye, the Dwarven camp would look like a drab, disorganized mess of sound and movement. Dwarves of all sizes and in all manners of dress were shuffling about in different directions, each tasked with a job that would ultimately contribute to the restoration of Erebor. Nori, who was casually sitting on an upturned crate with an apple in hand, watched the flow of traffic on the dusty road in front of him. He looked like the shining example of relaxed boredom as he slowly buffed his apple on his shirt before taking a large bite out of the fruit, but to the Dwarves who knew him well, they would have spotted the nervous way his eyes were continuously flitting about, studying his surroundings with suspicion.

Nori was anything but bored or relaxed. Nori was worried.

The Dwarf wiped his mouth with the back of his hands, lost in thought. He had just received the latest news about the gossips that were being spread around the camp, and things were not looking good for Thorin. Just as he had predicted, the king’s public announcement about his decision to send Dwarves to the farms had caused quite the stir, and opinions for and against it had been evenly split. However, with every new day, the tension between those two opposing fractions grows stronger. It will not be long before all this comes to a head and a violent, messy fight will break out.

Nori continued munching on his apple, but his brows were furrowed. A divided camp was bad enough as it is, but to also have half of the Dwarves in said camp angry towards Thorin was dangerous, not just for the king, but for the company members as well. At least Thorin had the foresight to warn them of the potential danger they could face so that they could shore up on defence. This wasn’t the best solution but it was better than doing nothing.

The thief hoped that someone, either Thorin himself or Balin, would come up with *something* more effective in addressing the actual issue at hand.

Either way, Nori decided firmly, *I need to report my findings to Thorin. I’ll let him figure out what he wants to do with this information.* Tossing the apple core to the ground without a care, he got up from the crate and wiped the sticky apple juice from his hands on his clothes. He spared a passing thought at Dori’s disapproval over the mess if he found out and grinned. Maybe after his meeting with Thorin, he could pay his older brother a visit to rile him up.

Nori could only blink at the surreal sight in front of him.

What in Durin's beard was going on?

Since the last time he had visited the Dwarven king, his tent had become something of a war zone. In the dimly lit room, Nori could make out the large, looming stacks of paper placed everywhere – along the walls, against the desk, under the chairs, there was barely enough space for a Dwarf to walk from Thorin's desk to the entrance unhindered. A smaller set of furniture (a cot, a chair, and a desk) were added, which not only made the tent significantly more crowded, but its presence also puzzled Nori greatly. *Is there someone else in here?* The thief thought and he immediately gave the area a quick once-over. Aside from Thorin's great surcoat that was piled haphazardly on the smaller desk (*most of it ended up spilling into the chair that was tucked in the desk*, Nori automatically noted, *the king must have been in a rush if he hadn't even bothered to fold his clothes*), there was really nothing out of the ordinary.

What an odd development, especially when the last few times he had reported to Thorin, everything had been organized with military precision.

Thorin waved at him to take a seat on the stool (*that's strange,* Nori's mind whispered again, *why couldn't he have moved his coat off the chair and offered that to me instead?*) and asked with uncharacteristic softness, "What news do you bring from the camps?"

Nori filed away all the odd little details for later and said, "I have received the latest gossips that were being spread in the camp, and I think we will be running into some…complications." He launched into a detailed retelling of the things he had heard, including his fears about a divided Dwarven camp and the escalating hostility they should come to expect if things were left to fester. Thorin's furrow grew more and more severe but he did not look particularly surprised. *Good,* Nori thought approvingly, *our king is not foolish enough to let his guard down even among these people whom he calls his allies*.

Nori always did appreciate finding a healthy dose of scepticism and suspicion in others.

Thorin sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I shall set up a meeting with Balin and Dwalin at once to see what actions we should take," he said quietly. He inclined his head forward in a regal nod and added, "Thank you for your report, Master Nori. Please continue to monitor the situation – "

Nori jumped up from his stool, unsheathing the small throwing knives he had hidden in his tunic. "What was that?" He said in a harsh whisper. Thorin followed his gaze to his coat on the desk, stared at it for a few quiet seconds, before looking back at the thief in confusion.

"What was what?" He asked, slowly.

"That!" Nori pointed frantically to Thorin's coat with his knife. "Your coat, it moved!"

"My coat moved…oh." Nori could have sworn that Thorin almost looked sheepish, but the Dwarven king turned away before the thief could catch a better glimpse at his expression. Instead, Thorin tiptoed to the pile of fur that was his coat and pealed it away until a familiar head of curly, russet locks was revealed and –

"Is that Master Baggins?" Nori stared, and sure enough, there was Bilbo Baggins slumped over the desk in deep sleep, buried under Thorin's large coat. "Wait, has he been here the whole time?"

"Ah, I thought you knew he was here," Thorin replied almost apologetically and Nori barely refrained from doing a double-take at *that*. Imagine that, Thorin Oakenshield apologizing to him! Nori wasn't sure if he had experienced anything more unbelievable. Luckily, the Dwarven king did not see the thief's poor attempt at recollecting his composure; he was distracted in his task to tuck his coat snugly around the Hobbit. "He has been helping me with my work," Thorin offered simply, brushing his hand over the coat that lay over Bilbo's curved back. The Hobbit shifted a little and unconsciously curled his hand over a discarded quill on the table nearby. Thorin chuckled softly under his breath at the sight. "Stubborn Hobbit," he breathed, his eyes molten in the flickering candlelight as his hands continued stroking rhythmically along the length of Bilbo's spine. Bilbo let out a quiet whimper and sighed.

Nori found himself inexplicably blushing at the painfully intimate moment. Honestly, couldn't Thorin continue with… *whatever* this was after he had left? Did the king even notice that he was still standing in the tent, for that matter?

Feeling more awkward than he had in decades, Nori tucked his knives back into his tunic and hesitantly cleared his throat to get the king's attention. When Thorin continued giving Bilbo what was undoubtedly a very longing gaze, Nori tossed caution to the wind and gave what was equivalent of a coughing fit.

Thorin jumped back, "Oh, Master Nori, is there anything else that you need?" He sounded so surprised by Nori's presence that the thief had to draw from his well of inner strength to refrain from rolling his eyes.

"No, that is all I have to report tonight, although…" Nori is going to regret asking this question but his curiosity has always gotten the best of him, "I can't help but notice the extra cot. Is that for Master Baggins?"

Finally, Thorin deigned to pay him enough attention to aim a frosty glare in his direction. "Master Baggins did not like the guards posted by his tent and have, instead, agreed to sleep here as a mean to protect himself if he were targeted."

Nori held up his hands in a placating motion, "Of course, Your Majesty. I did't mean anything by my question. Just curious is all. It's always better safe than sorry." He smiled as charmingly as he can and bowed lightly. "Now if you'll

excuse me, Your Majesty, it's best for me to head on out. I reckon you should get some rest yourself."

He was so eager to get away from the tent that he barely heard Thorin's response before making his escape. *Well, well, well,* he thought smugly as he sauntered his way to Dori's tent, *this evening has proved to be full of fun discoveries.*

A dangerous grin slowly spread across his face.

He has a brilliant, *horrible* plan that will solve their problem.

Part IX. Everyone else in the Company

"I have a brilliant, wonderful plan that will solve our problem!" Nori crowed out triumphantly once all the Dwarves had settled comfortably in a circle.

Next to him and sitting at the foot of Ori's cot, Dori scoffed derisively, "I don't understand the need for such secrecy. Really, showing up in pairs, five minutes apart like we had done when we were at Beorn's? What's going on and why are we all meeting in Ori's tent?"

The young Dwarf in question looked up when he heard his name. He was sandwiched uncomfortably between Dori and Dwalin on the cot, and he flinched when his oldest brother fired him a suspicious look. Dwalin automatically reached over to pat Ori's knee and the young scribe gave him a sweet, grateful smile.

Never one to be cowed by his older brother, Nori snapped back, "The need for such secrecy is required because of the topic we are about to discuss, you pompous windbag. Also," he spoke over the undignified sound of outrage that Dori made, "we would be drawing entirely too much suspicion if all eleven of us marched right up into Ori's tent like a merry band of Elves out on a picnic!"

"As to why I have chosen Ori's tent as our meeting place, our Ori has been known to entertain guests over tea time in the past, so it's not unusual for him to have a few visitors, here and there." Nori then added with a hint of steel, "Why, by the frequent way that Master Dwalin has been showing up, most would assume that he lives here!"

"WHAT?!" The look that Dori gave to Dwalin was so full of murder, the others visibly prepared themselves to restrain the oldest Ri brother. Ori covered his hands over his face and did his best to let his cot swallow him whole while Dwalin refused to back down. Keeping his posture ramrod straight, the warrior ignored the heavy blush that stained his cheeks and fearlessly stared back at Dori. Amongst the chaos, nobody except Bifur saw the glint of vindictive glee in Nori's eyes.

"It's not like that, Dori!" Ori mumbled pathetically, "Master Dwalin is kind enough to visit me and all we do is talk! Nothing is going on!"

"Like hell there is nothing going on!" Dori snarled. His arms quickly snaked out to grab his baby brother and he protectively clutched the struggling Dwarf close his chest. Ori yelped at being manhandled. "You are switching seats with me. I will not have you next to that…lecher!"

Before Dwalin could open his mouth to object, Ori pushed himself roughly out of his brother's grasp. "No, Dori!" He cried out angrily. He flung himself in front of the flabbergasted Dwalin and spread his arms out to *protect* the Dwarf, "I will not sit by and have you insult Master Dwalin! He is kind, loyal, honourable, and he doesn't make fun of me for talking about silly things and…and…I *like* knitting him things! So you leave him alone, the both of you," he levelled a glare at Nori, "or I will never forgive you!"

All the other Dwarves had to bite the insides of their cheeks to keep from laughing at Dori and Nori's betrayed expressions. "I see you have won yourself quite the protector," Balin muttered from his comfortably padded chair and he nudged his preening brother in the ribs.

On the ground across the cot, Kíli and Fíli were watching the spectacle unfold with rapt attention. "Oh!" Kíli exclaimed quite suddenly, "So *that's* what Bilbo had meant!"

Fíli wacked his brother on the back of his head and hissed out, "Now is not the time, Kíli!"

"Yes, now is not the time," Glóin repeated impatiently beside Fíli. He shifted in his chair, one of three in the room, and he had taken his from Óin by winning an impromptu arm wrestling challenge. Óin was still sulking on the ground beside him and Balin. "If you don't mind, I'd rather be kept in the dark regarding Master Dwalin's love life!"

"Perhaps we should all let Master Nori speak," said Bofur reasonably. He paused to look to his left at Bifur, who had stolen the last chair simply by being swift, and nodded after his cousin had delivered a slew of Khuzdûl. "I agree. The matter must be of great importance if he went to such lengths to get us all together like this."

"Thank you Master Bofur," Nori gave one last hurt-filled look at his baby brother and turned to the rest of the group. "I shall be frank; the Dwarves around here are pretty divided over Thorin's recent decision about the farms and this has

created a lot of tension in the camp. Those who oppose have already stirred up a lot of anger towards Thorin and if we let things stew, who knows what messy consequences will await us?"

A cry of outrage rose from the Company members.

"It is sad that the concept of loyalty is lost on this miserable lot!" Bombur spat out. He handed a plate of food to his neighbours. Never one to refuse food, Kíli plucked a piece of cheese from the platter and promptly popped it into his mouth with great gusto.

"This is everything that I have been afraid of," Balin groaned. "Thorin has just spoken to Dwalin and I about this and we still haven't come up with a reasonable solution."

"So what purpose does this gathering serve exactly?" Dwalin spoke up for the first time in the meeting. "We all have some idea on how bad things are out there. It seems like a waste of time to tell us something we know already," the Dwarf narrowed his eyes at the thief, "unless you are proposing a solution."

The grin that Nori flashed at Dwalin was not a kind one. "I do believe I have a solution, although I'm sure that Thorin will not like it. That's why I'm having this talk with you first."

"I will not plot behind my king's back!" Dwalin stood up violently, his fists clenched tightly by his side, "And how dare you – "

"It's about Bilbo and Thorin's relationship." Nori interrupted, unconcerned by the warrior's anger. "This will play a very integral part of this plan and that, my overly angry friend, is why Thorin will not like it." The thief tsked admonishingly, "Honestly, I'm as interested as you all are in keeping the king alive and well so *do* give me the benefit of doubt before you fly off the handle."

Under Balin and Ori's soothing ministrations, Dwalin grudgingly sat back down. It was a very confused Glóin who interjected next, "Wait. Relationship? Between the Hobbit and our king? What is this madness you speak of?"

Nori sighed. Right, he should have double-checked to make sure that everyone was on the same page as he was. In a blunt tone, he asked, "Who here knows about the growing mutual attraction between Master Bilbo and our king?"

The room went completely silent. Then, a wave of hands simultaneously shot up in the air; in fact, almost everyone had their hand up except for poor Dori and Glóin.

Nori raised his brows in surprise and the room exploded in excited gossip.

Dori gaped at Ori and asked, voice laden with heart-breaking disappointment, "You knew about this? Why didn't you tell me? What else have you been hiding from me?" He squinted suspiciously at Dwalin. "Are those new gloves? And the scarf?" Dori's face went pale when he wailed out, "*You made him a matching set using a new pattern!*"

"Wait," Glóin said, who chose to ignore Dori's increasingly loud cries of distress. He looked down incredulously at his brother's raised hand. "How on Middle-Earth did *you* find out?"

Óin rolled his eyes sarcastically, "I'm deaf, not blind! Anyone who spent enough time around them can see! I am their medic. I was there *all* the time!"

"Well then, this sure defeats the purpose of keeping things a secret!" Fíli said brightly to Kíli, "At least Mother will be pleased to know that everyone else has picked up on this. She can probably use more minions to do her bidding."

Dwalin whipped his head away from a panicking Ori and looked at the crown prince in horror. Lady Dís knew? Mahal have mercy on them all!

The loud chatter in the tent was cut short by Bifur, who jumped on the seat of his chair and delivered his usual rapid fire Khuzdûl.

Bofur cleared throat at the now silent room, "Yes, I still fail to see how this has anything to do with, well, anything."

Nori leaned forward and spoke in a low conspiring tone, "Well, in my opinion, the problem lies with a divided camp that's tearing itself apart over this farm business. What I am saying is that we find a new way to keep everyone busy, one that will unite the camp together." He grinned mischievously, "Give them something that everyone can get fixated on, something they can collectively rally behind." He shrugged and straightened himself, "At least until we have enough of our own people from the Blue Mountains here who have pledged their fealty to King Thorin. Once our people is here, we won't have to worry so much about being overwhelmed by those who oppose the king."

"So what you are saying is to present Thorin and Bilbo's relationship to the public as a distraction?" Balin shook his head, "I don't see how that will work."

"No, no, I am not just saying that!" Nori made a slashing motion with his hands and his voice was tinged with excitement, "What I am saying is that we give the audience a *show*, a story to really sink their teeth into. Here, think of it this way," he walked over to Bofur and held his hand out. The Dwarf looked up in surprised, shrugged and let himself be pulled up by Nori from his seat on the ground.

Nori continued with flourish, "I am an exiled king, who struggled for decades to restore the glory of my people. Long years have I worked to keep my people from starvation until finally, I have a chance to do what is right by reclaiming our long lost kingdom. To help me in my journey, I have hired a burglar." Nori waved a dismissive hand at Bofur and the

Dwarf gave a meek little wave and a small bow to the delight of his friends. “A burglar who is soft, gentle, well-mannered, utterly unspeakably *adorable*,” Nori spat those words out like a curse and behind him, Bofur diligently mimed out what was said. At ‘adorable’, he pulled his hat off, held it to his chest, and batted his lashes at the crowd. The Dwarves roared in laughter.

“For the longest time, I felt that the burglar was dead weight to the quest. He got himself into all manners of trouble and I could not understand why I had decided to hire him. That was, until – ”

“Until the Orcs and Wargs attacked and the burglar came to your rescue, sword swinging fearlessly at the enemies!” Dori chimed in and Bofur pulled Nori behind him, desperately waving a leg of lamb that he had snatched off Bombur’s plate to mimic the fight.

“Yes! And from then on, I began to see all the good in the gentle burglar – his bravery, his tenacity, his sweetness, his tendency to give people a verbal lashing when he’s particularly cross!”

“And he is still as bloody adorable as ever!” Óin called out amidst the cheers of his peers.

“And the burglar?” Kíli asked playfully, “How does he feel for the king?”

“Why, the burglar has always admired the king. Rather hard not to when you look like this!” Nori made a ridiculous eyebrow waggle, cocked his hips to one side, and gestured loosely down the length of his body. Bifur keeled over laughing in his chair.

“The attraction between the burglar and the king only grows stronger as the journey wears on until the two are so close together, they are practically attached by the hip!” Nori wrapped an arm around Bofur’s shoulders and brought him close. “Alas, the journey has plenty of obstacles to distract them from examining the depths of their emotions and it isn’t until now that they could confront where they stand with each other.”

Nori pulled away and said dramatically, “But will they take this opportunity? To the others, it is obvious that the burglar and the king like each other, but do they even realize what they are truly feeling themselves? Also, can the king lower himself to court a commoner or will the burglar’s inevitable return to his home put an end to any hope for their love to flourish? Will their story end happily or in heart-break?”

Everyone in the room watched with bated breath. Nori crossed his arms and spoke evenly, “People like a good story and this one is a very good one that is happening right in front of them.”

“And all we have to do is sell it to the public, get these people emotionally invested,” Balin nodded in understanding. “It will certainly present the king in a different light. He will seem much more relatable.”

“As for those who are less inclined to invest emotionally, get them invested financially. We can start a betting pool!” Glóin stood from his seat and hoisted his axe up, “I can get that started!”

“This is so exciting!” Bombur rubbed his hands together and smiled a sunny smile. “This is exactly like ‘The Eternal Love of Fulla and Buri’ except it’s real!”

It was as if a dam had finally been broken and the tent was flooded once more with chatter:

“How will we get this story out though? We need to find a way to spread this tale quickly!”

“Oh, we can make pamphlets! Ori is a great artist, he can probably draw something!”

“Well, I…I guess I can try?”

“I can’t believe you actually read ‘Fulla and Buri’, you sap!”

“Oh shut up, practically everyone has read ‘Fulla and Buri’. I’m the only one who’s secured enough with my masculinity to admit it!”

“Who will write the story? We need someone who can do a fantastic job with storytelling!”

“Kíli and I can do that! I think Mother will probably like to help too!”

“We can also have this as a song! Bifur is really talented with composing songs!”

“I still don’t like this. All this scheming without telling the king, that’s not right,” Dwalin muttered darkly to Balin and glowered at the excited Dwarves. “I don’t think Thorin will like how everyone knows about his private affairs.”

“Well that’s where you’re wrong, brother,” Balin answered just as quietly, “the events that Master Nori has told us are hardly kept a secret and Thorin has been more than open with his display of affection.” He hummed at Dwalin’s skeptical look, “Remind me to tell you what happened at the meeting with Bard later on.”

“Alright, alright, settle down! We need to lay out some ground rules for everybody.” Nori patiently waited until the noise died down and for everyone to retake their seats. “First off, we can’t have anyone interfering with Master Bilbo Baggins and King Thorin’s love life. Our job is to observe what is happening only. We may all secretly cheer them on, fawn over what they have done right or despair over the way they tiptoe nervously around each other, but under no circumstances do we mention any of this to them.”

“Secondly, keep the published material tasteful! We want to portray Master Baggins and our king positively. This is not an excuse to churn out smut!” The Dwarves snickered at the rule and Bifur made a rude gesture behind Nori’s back.

“Thirdly, we should meet regularly to coordinate our efforts. I’m thinking once a week but we can work on the date and time later.”

“Is everyone in accord?” A chorus of affirmative “Aye’s” answered back and Nori nodded in satisfaction. “In that case, let’s get started.”

Notes:

Holy moly guys! Thank you so much for coming back and reading this. I’m sorry this has taken so long to churn out. My RL has definitely been very busy as of late but I am glad to announce that things are starting to settle. Hurray! Thank you so much for your patience and I hope you all will enjoy this extra long chapter to compensate for your long wait.

On another note, my birthday is in a few days and nothing will make me happier to read your comments, so as always, please review/kudos/favourite/bookmark if you’re enjoying this! I know I am having tons of fun with writing this and I can only hope that you all are still finding this remotely interesting. <3

Notes about this chapter:

[1] All “eleven” Dwarves marched to Ori. Eleven, not twelve, because Ori was already waiting in his tent. ;)

[2] I’ve been referring to this chapter as the one where Nori decides to make Bilbo and Thorin everyone’s OTP.

[3] ‘The Eternal Love of Fulla and Buri’ was mentioned in the last chapter in Dis’ letter. She accused Thorin of loving the book. She was right; it’s a bit of his secret shame. It also happens to be a secret shame for a lot of Dwarves too.

[4] Nori’s solution was inspired by the fandom. He has singlehandedly started the creation of a Middle-Earth’s version of fanfiction, fanart, and fan-ballad? I guess the latter is like a precursor of fan made videos. The hapless Dwarves represent us fans who won’t know what hit them until they find themselves sleepless at night, shipping their OTP like it’s a drug.

Chapter 6 **(http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1434178)**

Notes:

Betaed by toraberushimeri from tumblr. Many, many thanks for her prompt response and generous offer to help! :)

If you guys are interested, you can follow me at: bgtea.tumblr.com

[EDIT] This is so exciting! Major major thanks to daysofsummer for her lovely translation of the fic in Chinese. http://archiveofourown.org/works/775620

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_6_endnotes) .)

Part X. The Dwarven Camp

Fíli and Kíli’s Super Secret Awesome Spy Report #5

Note: We are writing this quickly before we forget all the details we have witnessed, and by Durin’s beard, if we hadn’t seen it with our own eyes, we would have not believed it ourselves! *(Oh, Mother is going to like this!)*

Targets: Uncle and Mr. Bilbo Baggins. We don’t have to worry about Dwalin and Ori anymore because we have solved that mystery! *(Our self-preservation instincts are also telling us not to bother Ori when the poor Dwarf had just gone through a very traumatic “talk” with Dori…if that is even the right word to describe that horrible encounter)*.

Basically, what happened was this: Dori trapped Ori into a corner after the meeting and proceeded to screech at his poor brother. *(There was also a lot of flailing involved)*. Ori took everything with surprising aplomb and did not even hesitate to yell right back at the older Dwarf when push comes to shove. Like all family fights, it quickly escalated into both Dwarves recounting the others’ past failings.

(During all of this, Dwalin hovered around the two Ri brothers, torn between wanting to stop the fight or to stand back to avoid getting hurt. I don’t blame him. Dori in his mother hen mode is downright terrifying. He also has a mean right hook). The fight reached its peak when Ori defiantly announced that he was “half-way through making Master Dwalin a jumper,” one that matches with Ori’s favourite one in fact, and that “there’s nothing Dori can do to stop him!”

(Dori just stared at him, utterly flummoxed, and before we even realized it, he had latched himself on to Ori and delivered what looked like a crushing embrace). Then, Dori started to bawl really, really loudly about "What happened to my sweet, innocent Ori?!" and something along the lines of, "too late to save your virtue, I have failed you as an older brother!!"

As for poor Dwalin, who had clearly given up on this situation at this point, he spent the rest of the argument looking like he was sending a fervent prayer to Mahal to strike him from where he stood. He would have gladly launched himself in front of a stampeding oliphaunt if it meant he could be spared from all of this misery.

*(Well, unfortunately for him, Mahal did not answer and Dwalin lived to see Dori's display. All this drama for a sweater…I don't think I can ever understand the Ri brothers).*Me neither, Kíli. Me neither.

Goal: To observe Uncle Thorin and Bilbo's interactions carefully to see if they have finally done something that would make Mother happy. *(And by that, we meant have dirty, raunchy sex.)* Frankly, I rather not think about Uncle having sex with anybody, let alone Bilbo. In fact, the added knowledge that Mother was actively seeking to find out about Uncle's love life only made things much more mentally scarring. *(Sometimes, it's best not to ask why.)*

Impact of mission if successful:

At this point, who the heck even knows? We're just doing what we're told! *(Yes, because spying on Uncle is clearly the lesser of two evil as opposed to defying Mother's orders. It is also the choice to make if you want to keep breathing. To ignore Mother would automatically mean that you have forfeited your life)*.

Day 5

Meeting time duration: Night time after our Epic Meeting of Epicness, nine o'clock

Summary of events:

After spending a good amount of time dividing up our tasks in detail and fleshing out our Battle Plan, we called it a night and dispersed rapidly from Ori's tent *(once we were sure that Dori would not murder Dwalin gruesomely that is. He should be just fine! Balin was there as his backup*). Kíli and I were walking back to our tent when we spotted Bilbo from a distance, carrying his customary pot of tea on a wooden tray. *(He only used that particular pot whenever he planned on visiting Uncle so it was clear where he was going).* Which pot? Are we talking about that really fancy one made from cut crystal? *(Yes, that's it! It's the one with the gold handle and spout, and it has all those precious gems on it as decorations. Fanciest pot I have ever seen. I wonder why Bilbo kept using it whenever he was dropping by Uncle's place.)*

Oh, I know why! I heard from Balin that Uncle gave that to Bilbo after having found it in the vault. Remember that time when Bilbo refused those gift offers of ponies and golden chariots? Apparently, Uncle took it as a personal mission to find something that Bilbo would like, which should surprise nobody really. It's common knowledge that Uncle really doesn't do well with rejection. *(Well no wonder he got rejected! What can Bilbo possibly do with a golden chariot and ponies anyhow? Uncle clearly isn't very good with this whole gift giving thing.)* And that is exactly why Balin had to step in to help! He's good at dispensing his wisdom, although Balin had asked Uncle to give Bilbo a less extravagant teapot. Clearly, Uncle disagreed. He was hell-bent that his gift had to be golden, for whatever reasons. *(Well, what does it matter? Bilbo accepted it anyway!)* He probably did it to spare our poor Uncle's feelings or to stop Uncle's mad quest to prove himself.

(And thank Mahal for that! I don't think I can take another spar session from Hell if Uncle decides to sulk over Bilbo again. Next time, I think I'm just going to make a run for freedom and hide under Bilbo's bed.)

Anyway, we spotted Bilbo with that ridiculous teapot of his and after having spent so many times spying on the Hobbit, it had become an automatic response to dive for the nearby bush at the sight of him. *(We dove expertly. Dwalin would have been proud of our awesome stealth abilities if he wasn't so worried about getting castrated in his sleep by Dori.)*

Once the coast was clear and once we really made sure that Bilbo was heading in the direction for Uncle's tent, we dusted ourselves off and followed him. It took us a lot longer to get to the tent than we had anticipated. *(That's because Fíli picked the worst possible path to get to Uncle Thorin's and we ended up fumbling in the dark, knocking into all manners of crates and barrels. I'm surprised that Bilbo hadn't caught wind of us; we weren't exactly being very stealthy at this point!)* The path that I took was supposed to give us the best cover in the dark! I was thinking about tactics, which clearly is something you lack in! Besides, I didn't hear you complaining about time when we detoured for food and blankets! *(What? I like food! And that last stakeout without food was a horrible one! If I'm going to sit around and risk getting emotionally scarred, I should at least be well fed!)*

We went back to our hideout, the one by the barrels, and we built a small fire to make ourselves comfortable. As stakeouts go, this one was probably the best one we had. We were warm, we were fed *(we cooked over the fire)* and we were occupied with our work on the story. Here was what we came up with:

(Bilbo Baggins was having a pleasant dinner when his quiet evening was disturbed by the unexpected arrival of twelve Dwarves and Gandalf the Wizard. Although confused, the Hobbit's gentle, kind heart could not bear to turn away

anyone hungry, so he decided to let them in.)

Oh, don't forget to add this bit in – Bilbo had also met Gandalf in the past so the Hobbit was much more agreeable to let this group of strangers into his home with the Wizard present.

(Alright, we'll fit that in somewhere. Anyway, the grateful Dwarves thanked their kind host and in return, they kept themselves composed most admirably. Why, Middle-Earth has probably never seen such well-mannered, poised, and intelligent Dwarves as this group! They even offered to do the dishes after they were done!)

Don't forget handsome! It's very important that everyone knows about our handsomeness.

(Yes. Middle-Earth has never seen such well-mannered, poised, devilishly handsome, and intelligent Dwarves as this group, with special emphasis on the two princes who have devastatingly rugged good looks. I like where this is going already, Fíli!)

Meanwhile, a confused Bilbo pulled Gandalf aside in hopes to gain some sort of explanation to why the group was in his home, but like all Wizards, Gandalf only said cryptically *(and rather unhelpfully)* to be patient.

"All will be explained after the last guest arrives," Gandalf said wisely while stroking his beard, because he's Gandalf the Grey and everything he says comes off simultaneously wise-sounding and confusing. That's probably his wizard power, along with the penchant to set things that ought not to be on fire, on fire.

(He can also do this thing with smoke rings and turn them into butterflies.)

Yes, clearly the extent of Gandalf the Grey's powers can be summarized by: confusing people into thinking that he's a lot wiser than he actually is, his talent for pyrotechnics, and making butterflies out of smoke rings.

(A series of loud knocks cut through the relaxed atmosphere of Bag-End and Bilbo, who was not only an adorable and kind little Hobbit but was also a fantastic host, went to open the door.)

Standing on his front step was a Dwarf more majestic than Bilbo had ever seen, and the Hobbit was left gaping silently at the stranger, drinking in the divine sight that was in front of him.

(Really? Divine sight? That's laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?)

I'm doing this for dramatic effect! Leave it alone! And can I continue now, or do you have more to criticize?

(Alright, alright! No need to be so sensitive.)

As I was saying, the first thing Bilbo noticed was the Dwarf's impressive build; not even the thick layers of his clothing could hide the Dwarf's large, broad shoulders. Bilbo continued looking up, tracing his eyes along the stranger's long, thick cascading locks, those piercing blue eyes, the long, elegant nose and the neatly cropped beard. Why, without a doubt, the Dwarf has got to be the most handsome being that Bilbo has ever laid his eyes on!

(Which is not true at all. Some would even argue, with good reason, that the princes would give the stranger a run for his money in the looks department, but clearly, the Hobbit was unreasonably biased.)

Then, the tall, dark, and mysterious Dwarf tossed his mane of glorious hair, casted Bilbo a smouldering look and said in his deep, spine-tingling, shiver-inducing baritone voice, "Are my companions inside?"

There were only so many surprises that the normally reserved Bilbo could take in one evening. Feeling lightheaded, the Hobbit squeaked out an answer before pitching dramatically to the side. Panicked, the Dwarf lunged forward just in time to catch the wilting Hobbit in his protective hold.

And that's all we have worked on so far. Shortly after that, Kíli and I fell asleep, and it wasn't until the dawn chorus that we woke up *(bloody loud birds)*. It was a lucky thing that we did! Otherwise, we would not have seen Bilbo leaving Uncle's tent in the wee hours of the morning.

Bilbo had obviously stayed the night.

In Uncle's tent.

Bilbo *stayed* the night and he was all alone except with Uncle! And they had tea, which for all we know could lead to other unspeakable things!

(He came out wearing a new set of clothes as well! What does this mean? Does this mean what we think it means and what Mother wanted it to mean? Or does this mean something entirely different than what we thought it meant and probably unrelated to what Mother wanted it to mean as well? Or maybe it <u>does</u> mean what we want it to mean, even though Uncle and Bilbo will probably deny that it had meant anything like Mother wanted it to mean. For all we know, it could very well mean nothing at all, or that we're all horribly wrong, which only leaves Uncle and Bilbo to know what it had really meant. Argh! I'm so confused!)

This is too good to pass up. Mother needs to know.

- Fíli and Kíli

MOTHER! WE BRING YOU THE NEWS YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR!

Kíli and I have been diligently keeping an eye on Master Baggins' visits to Uncle and this morning, we caught Bilbo leaving the tent after spending the night there! We have included a summarized version of our spy adventure with this letter, which should contain our observations in more detail. Hopefully, the Raven hadn't had too much trouble carrying it all to you.

So I guess that settles it, right? We've got our definitive proof that Uncle and Bilbo are definitely, positively together, having the time of their lives in their –

(Don't, Fíli!)

Love. Nest.

One of these days, I will write a song and it will be called 'Love Nest' just to see you squirm uncomfortably. I even have one line of the song penned out just now! It will go something like this: 'The Love Nest is a little old place where they can get together'.

Huh. Something is a bit off. Maybe 'Love Shack' will sound better than 'Love Nest'.

(I hate you, Fíli.) I love you too, Kíli.

(Also, can we stop spying on them now, Mum? I don't want to sleep in the cold anymore, not when we have nice, cozy tents set up for us! I'm hungry and I'm bored!)

On another topic, things at the camp have been pretty tense lately. After Uncle had announced his decision to send Dwarves to help out with the farms, the camp had been divided into those who supported Uncle and those who did not. Many of us from the Company are afraid that the anger will build to a point where the Dwarves would not only attack each other, but they would also attempt a revolt against Uncle as well. Luckily, Master Nori, our spymaster, has come up with an ingenious solution that will not only distract the Dwarves but will also serve to unite them.

Last night, the Company members (minus Bilbo and Uncle Thorin) had a meeting and Kíli and I found out that practically everyone knew about Uncle and Bilbo. *(That was a relief! For a moment there, I was starting to believe that Ori, Fíli and I had gotten their relationship all wrong. If everyone else could see it, then clearly that's not the case!)* Nori then suggested that we should use Uncle and Bilbo's relationship as a way to distract the public. "Think of them as characters like Fulla and Buri," Nori had said, "Their love story is by far one of the most popular ones among the Dwarves. We can do the same here with our king and our burglar. We just need a good story teller to pen down their budding romance and a way to promote the hell out of it!"

During the meeting, the Company had agreed to tackle this project in three phases – Phase One will be the release of a highly romanticised account of our journey *(with emphasis on Uncle and Bilbo's legendary encounter)*, Phase Two will be a dramatic retelling of the things happening now, and Phase Three is when we get to invent all sorts of fun scenarios for their future. At the moment, we're working on the written draft for Phase One with Ori in charge of illustrations and pamphlet design. Bifur is working on a ballad.

(We have no idea what to call this project yet! We couldn't settle on a name without breaking into a massive fist fight, so we're going to leave it as 'Epic Untitled Project Where We Bring Together Two People Whose Names We Shall Not Mention' for now. We like to refer to it as 'That Project' for short!)

We really need a better name for this. Also, would you like to help, Mum?

With lots of love,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 22 Jan., 2942.

P.S. It looks like you're doing well in the Blue Mountains with the business! Kíli and I are glad to hear that you are beating the Elves in sales with your new product. Do you have any plans to expand your operations?

To my two wonderful boys,

Now, just because Master Baggins spent the night in your uncle's tent, that may not necessarily mean anything (even though it presents so many interesting possibilities, oh my!) For all we know, the Hobbit could have fallen asleep helping your Uncle. I shall get to the bottom of this with Thorin, so you do not have to worry about your spy mission at the moment. For now, please focus more on your 'Phase One' project. I would imagine that you need to have this completed as soon as possible.

Good job, my dears.

And speaking of this 'Epic Project', I must applaud Master Nori for coming up with such an elegant solution for the problem with the divided camp. I wholeheartedly approve of his creativity, his resourcefulness, and the utter hell that he will undoubtedly unleash on my brother. Maybe your uncle Thorin will actually get somewhere with Bilbo at the end of all this. Reading Thorin's emotionally stunted response in his letter to his obviously deep seated affection for his Hobbit was

funny a month ago. Now, I cannot help but feel sad at the glacial pace that your uncle and his Hobbit are advancing in their strange little relationship. Something drastic must be done and it must be done fast before we die from old age!

Please let Master Nori know that I would be more than happy to offer my services for 'Phase Three' once it is in place. I have a lot of ideas for stories that I would like to write about. After all, I have promised your Uncle in my previous letters to him and I will be more than *delighted* to deliver on said promise.

Please keep yourselves safe, and try not to let your uncle know about your involvement in all this if you want to be spared from his wrath. When trying to escape from predators, or your enraged uncle, try to run in a zigzag formation. This will make it much harder for him to tackle you from behind, as he won't be able to predict your movement.

Love always,

Your Mother

Thorin's Hall, 2942

P.S. At the moment, I haven't made any further plans to expand my operations. Instead, I would like to focus on refining the types of brews so that we can further build up on our reputation for providing excellent quality products. And yes, the Elves have been thoroughly trounced in their own game. I would be lying through my teeth if I said that my goal wasn't to beat them and that I was more than happy with the performance of my company. Sod that! The truth is, not only am I sleeping much better with the knowledge that my company crushed theirs' in sales, I will also be taking every future opportunity to gloat about my very decisive victory over them. Let this be a lesson to remember: humbleness is overrated!

To my dearest brother whom I keep hearing more and more interesting news about,

I was told that a certain Master Baggins has been spotted more and more frequently in and around your tent. As your sister, it is then my duty to ask whether or not you have shagged your Hobbit yet.

Love always,

Your honourable sister, Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2942

P.S. I also heard that the Dwarves at the camp are none too happy with your farming decision, not like we haven't seen *that* coming. Have you implemented any security measures?

From Erebor, 2942.

To my sister Dís whose impertinence still manages to make me choke on my morning beverage, even if she is half-way across Middle-Earth,

I'm not sure which one is worse - you sending me a Raven just to rudely ask if I had engaged in…certain *acts* with Master Baggins, or you bothering to ask if I had engaged in said acts with Master Baggins after I have told you numerous times that I consider him as a *dear friend*.

The answer is no, you evil harpy.

Just so that we are clear on this - I have not engaged in sexual activities of *any* sort with the Hobbit. This includes any sort of sexual penetrative acts wherein one person's orifice has been entered by other objects or by any parts of the body belonging to another person. Now stop asking, for Mahal's sake!

I will also have you know that my intentions have been nothing but noble towards Bilbo. After your last letter, I had decided that it would be best to assign two sets of guards for him, one to follow Bilbo around the camp during the day and the other to keep him safe when he sleeps at night. In my haste to make these arrangements however, I have angered him as I have given the orders without consulting his opinion. The Hobbit did not wish to be shadowed by "a small fleet of Dwarves." He also thought that the soldiers guarding his tent at night were a waste of able-bodied men.

The problem was effectively solved when Master Baggins boldly made the decision to sleep in my tent from now on so that I may dismiss his night guards. Within minutes, I was forced into shifting my furniture around to make room for my new guest. As you can see, it was Bilbo who happily *coerced* his way into my living spaces and when I called him out on his boldness, he had the gall to dismiss my complaints…as if they were completely unwarranted!

The only thing we spent the night passionately doing was to curse the invention of paperwork. And then we fell asleep.

Because we were tired.

From a night of paperwork.

I hope I have made myself extremely clear regarding all this.

- Thorin

P.S. I have spoken with the rest of the Company about the potential dangers they could face, and we have agreed to travel around the camp with our weapons at all times and in twos or more. Daín had also made a few public announcements to show his continuing support with my decision and I believe that his show of loyalty is what's holding his soldiers' anger at bay. If he is planning something against me, I have yet to see any proof of it. At this point, I trust him more than I do his supporters.

There was something strange going on in the camp.

Clutching a fresh bundle of clothes that he had retrieved from his old living quarters, Bilbo looked warily at the Dwarves around him as he walked along the dirt path to Thorin's spacious tent. Lately, Bilbo had found himself increasingly approached by random Dwarven soldiers who had not only seemed unreasonably *giddy* by Bilbo's presence, but would also leave cryptic compliments like, "Well done, laddie," and "You're brave for such a wee lil' one!"

He frowned and squinted suspiciously at the group of soldiers to his right. They beamed, cried out his name in unison, and waved very enthusiastically at him. Bilbo gave a tentative wave back, ducked his head, and walked a little faster away from the madmen.

What was going on?

Bilbo wished he could have noticed this sooner, but it wasn't as if the Hobbit would have had the time to investigate further into this strange new development. The past two weeks had passed by in a whirl of activity, and Bilbo had found himself being whisked away in endless meetings to discuss about the sudden influx of Lake-town refugees that had arrived in the valley.

"I had offered a portion of my gold to the Master of Lake-town so that he may use it to restore the town," Bard had explained to Bilbo and the Dwarves during one particularly long and trying meeting. "It seemed that the Master had disappeared with the gold, leaving the town folk to fend for themselves. Most of the people decided to seek aid in Dale as a result."

This had effectively thrown a wrench in the recent farming plans. It wasn't until after several meetings and the completion of three large piles of paperwork that the Dwarves and Men could re-establish a new plan to accommodate the food demands of a larger population. As usual, Dáin's advisors had not been happy about the changes.

"We are not sending more Dwarves to the farms!" Borin had cried out when Bard's advisor – *the overly nervous-looking one,* Bilbo's mind supplied – had deigned to ask *nervously*.

"What other alternatives do you suggest, Master Borin," Bard's second advisor countered in a challenging tone and the Dwarven advisor had snapped his mouth shut.

In the end, no amount of shouting across the table could solve the problem except to rework the number of farm hands that they needed. A rotation system for the workers was established to minimize the time that each Dwarf would spend in the field, unless the worker himself chose to work extra hours. The farmers from Dale were to follow a separate plan altogether. Additionally, Thorin and Bard agreed to pay a generous wage, as both an incentive to all workers, and a mean to soothe the Dwarves' lingering anger.

It was work as usual in spite of all the drama (Bard's nervous-looking advisor had almost fainted twice, and Frór had gotten into a shouting match with Borin of all people while Dáin looked on, amused). Nothing particularly unusual had happened.

No, Bilbo's eyes lit up in realization, *the oddity started afterwards during Thorin and Dáin's public announcement*.

They had anticipated a wave of violent anger from their audience after Thorin and Dáin had given an update to the farming situation. The members from Thorin's Company had even prepared for the worst by strategically positioning themselves around Thorin to fend off any potential attacks. To Bilbo's surprise however, the Dwarven audience was oddly docile that day and if Bilbo hadn't known better, he would have sworn that the Dwarves were more fixated on *his* presence over anything else. Bilbo had stiffened nervously from the unwarranted attention, and Thorin automatically grasped the Hobbit by the shoulder to gently nudge Bilbo closer to his side. In that instance, it seemed like all eyes from the audience had flickered to Thorin's hand, hungrily following his protective gesture.

Afterwards, there was minimal grumbling from the otherwise hot-blooded Dwarves. Bilbo should have realized then that something wasn't right.

Grasping his bundle tighter against his chest, Bilbo quickly cast another look at the suspiciously happy Dwarves to his left and to his right. Maybe Thorin will have a better idea to what is going on.

"The Dwarves are acting very nice to me as of late, Thorin. It's rather unnerving."

Thorin paused in his reading and turned to look up at Bilbo incredulously from his desk. “Unfortunately there isn’t much I can do about that,” the Dwarven king started. He was entirely unsure where Bilbo was going with his complaint but he still suggested teasingly, “Unless, of course, you want me to order the camp to stop being nice to you?”

“It’s a legitimate problem!” Bilbo crossed his arms defensively and scowled. He did not appreciate Thorin’s glib and unsympathetic answer at all. “Did you know that today, I’ve had ten Dwarves approach me on separate occasions to compliment me on my bravery?”

Thorin casually leaned back in his chair and stared at the Hobbit, unimpressed. “You don’t say,” he said, completely deadpan. Bilbo rolled his eyes and skulked over to his cot to deposit his fresh bundle of clothes. He gave up. There was no way he could continue without making him come off as any less crazy.

Thorin, who had been tracking Bilbo’s movement, fought to keep his smile at bay lest the Hobbit became angry. “Perhaps it is a new disease that has been spreading across the camp. It makes Dwarves susceptible to the charms of small gentlehobbits,” the Dwarven king joked easily.

Bilbo scoffed, “If it’s a disease, I wish it would have infected Masters Borin and Frór. They seem to hate me just as much as before.” Satisfied that everything was neatly arranged, Bilbo walked over to Thorin and peered curiously at the desk. “So what are you working on now?”

“The latest set of reports on Erebor’s reconstruction efforts,” Thorin hummed distractedly and he turned his attention back on the piece of paper in front of him. At least he looked much more relaxed now that their hellish paperwork marathon from two weeks ago was over. “Also, Masters Borin and Frór do not hate you. They are simply traditional in their way of thinking and they can be…difficult,” Thorin wrinkled his nose in mild distaste, “and stuffy.” Then, he added as an afterthought, “Like Balin, except more obnoxious. Sometimes, I wonder how Dáin can stand those two.”

“Gossiping like a pair of old wives, I see,” a dry voice replied unexpectedly from the entrance.

Bilbo jumped from his spot and squeaked in surprise. Thorin, on the other hand, retorted evenly without looking up, “Ah, Dwalin! At least we’re not eavesdropping like a little old maid.” He finally glanced at the warrior and immediately did a double take. “By Durin’s name, what the hell happened to you?” Thorin cried out.

Bilbo’s eyes widened as he watched the large Dwarf *limp* his way inside the tent. Thorin had every right to sound alarmed; away from the glare of the sunlight, every bruise and cut that peppered along Dwalin’s face and arms were made visible. Bilbo winced at the warrior’s heavily swollen left eye before scurrying away to grab the bandages and ointment he had kept in store for Thorin.

Dwalin sat down gingerly on a nearby stool with a grunt. “I had a bit of a disagreement,” he paused and thanked Bilbo gruffly when the Hobbit handed him a bottle of Óin’s concoction. “Apparently, Dori does not like it when I spend quiet evenings with his baby brother, trying on the knitted clothing he made for me.” A large, positively *evil* grin spread across his face and he added darkly, “He also does not like to walk in on us snogging on the table.”

Bilbo choked on air and Thorin gave a short bark of laughter. “Colour me surprised that Dori hasn’t murdered you in cold blood,” the king muttered. He shook his head in disbelief, reaching over to rub Bilbo’s back when the Hobbit’s coughing fit had not eased up. “Was it worth it at least?”

Dwalin could not sound any more smug when he answered, “Oh yes. Very much so.”

Thorin snorted unattractively. “So you survived the beating and instead of going to the healing tent, the first thing you did was to limp over here to gloat about it.” He reached for a pitcher of water by the cabinet and poured out a glass. When Dwalin made to grab at the cup, Thorin pulled it protectively to his chest and said in a haughty tone, “Pour your own water, this isn’t for you!” The king turned around and handed the cup to Bilbo, who took it gratefully but not before slipping a small smile at Thorin.

It was a testimony to Dwalin’s good mood that the warrior hadn’t commented on the clear favouritism. He cleared his throat and started to slather the ointment on his wounds. “So what was it about Dáin’s advisors? They haven’t been giving you any trouble, have they?” The warrior asked bluntly.

“Oh no, Master Dwalin! I was just telling Thorin how I wish those two would be more pleasant to be around with, like most of the Dwarves around the camp as of late.” Bilbo pulled the chair from his desk closer to the warrior and took a seat, careful not to spill from the cup that he still had in his hand. “I had ten Dwarves approach me to pay me different compliments today, and yesterday, random soldiers were raising their glasses at me when I passed them by. I wonder if something happened lately for me to get all this attention…” Bilbo trailed off. He missed the flicker of panic that had momentarily made its way on Dwalin’s face before the warrior could smooth out his expression into a bored, nonchalant façade.

“Actually, I meant to talk to you about that.”

Dwalin’s unexpected answer was enough to snap both Thorin and Bilbo to attention. Thorin narrowed his gaze at his friend suspiciously. “What’s going on?”

The intimidating look was entirely lost on the warrior; the Dwarf was much too busy rubbing more salve on a painful looking cut by his elbow. “There is a story being spread around the camp,” Dwalin said lowly. He grimaced a little when his fingers brushed against the ring of purpling bruise around the cut. “It’s an elaborate retelling of the quest, and it features the both of you as the main characters.”

“Oh, I thought that most people have already heard all about it from the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins.”

Dwalin noticed Bilbo’s wince at the song and quirked his lips in amusement. “The Ballad only briefly mentioned the events of the quest. The story goes into much more detail than that.”

“Well, I guess that explains why people are suddenly so interested in me. At least it isn’t anything bad,” Bilbo nodded, feeling very much relieved that there was a perfectly logical explanation to the oddity that he had experienced.

Thorin, however, was not so easily satisfied. “In what ways does this story talk about Bilbo and me?”

Dwalin reached into his tunic, pulled out a small pamphlet, and handed it to his king. “See for yourself.”

Bilbo glanced over curiously and was disappointed to see the neat rows of Khuzdûl on the parchment. Meanwhile, Thorin had rapidly begun to scan through the page, his brows furrowed in concentration. At the Dwarven king’s sombre expression, Bilbo and Dwalin daren’t speak, choosing instead to watch Thorin’s response in anticipation.

Of course, this was quickly turned into confusion when Bilbo noticed that Thorin’s frame was starting to shake rather violently. The Hobbit and the Dwarven warrior leaned closer to see what was going on and…was Thorin *laughing*?

Thorin lowered the pamphlet with a large grin on his face. “*Divine sight?*” he echoed in disbelief, as if he wasn’t sure if he had read that correctly. Dwalin gave a sheepish look in response and Thorin continued, “That’s laying it on a bit thick!”

“I never claimed that it was a well-written piece,” Dwalin shrugged. Bilbo looked quickly between the two Dwarves, obviously dying of curiosity.

“Well, what does it say?” he asked when no more was being said.

“It is as Dwalin had said – It’s just a rewritten version of the quest, although the author has taken a lot of creative liberty when it came to describing me.” Thorin chuckled and shook his head, “For some reason, the author seemed to be extremely fixated by my ‘majesticness’. That word was used five times on this page alone.”

Bilbo blinked. “Oh, well, it’s not hard to believe given that it’s *you*,” the Hobbit said matter-of-factly. Having suddenly realized what he had blurted out, he flushed and quickly back-pedaled, “er, that is to say –”

The look on Thorin’s face was practically predatory. “Oh no, Master Baggins. Please do continue,” the Dwarf said lightly, his smug amusement apparent from his cocky smirk. Then, Thorin casually bent forward to rest his forearms over his knees, all the while keeping a loose grasp on the pamphlet. “I would love to hear why you think I deserved to be called ‘majestic’.”

Bilbo flushed even harder, gaped speechlessly at the Dwarven king and spluttered out, “Well, I’m not going to feed you any more compliments! You definitely don’t need them! Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go wash this cup!” Bilbo stormed out of the tent with the sound of Thorin’s bright laughter drifting behind him, blushing so hard that even the tips of his ears felt hot.

“Do you want me to do something about that?” Dwalin gestured at the pamphlet that was still in Thorin’s hand once Bilbo’s footsteps faded away in the distance.

Thorin tossed the paper carelessly on his desk. “Leave it for now. It’s perfectly harmless and if anything, it is helping Bilbo to gather more respect, respect that he rightfully deserves.”

“What about future pamphlets, if there are any?”

Thorin paused before answering carefully, “As long as these pamphlets do not damage either Bilbo’s or my own reputation, we can leave it alone. These are stories that will no doubt be passed around as gossip in the camp anyway. There’s hardly any point in stopping them.”

“Now then,” Thorin flashed Dwalin a knowing look and the warrior groaned, already dreading the question that his king will ask next, “what exactly happened between you, Ori and Dori?”

Notes:

So the last chapter happened…and your amazing response happened as well. Wow, I am in awe at your genuine enthusiasm for this fic! Thanks a bunch for sticking by, even when I’m a notoriously slow writer/am a terrible procrastinator!

Thanks to everyone who kudosed, recced, favourited, bookmarked…you name it. I do notice every one of you! If you enjoy this, please let me know! Comments are love and sometimes, I feel like they’re the only things that can get me motivated enough to keep going.

Chapter notes:

[1] Major kudos to the readers who now has that 'Love Shack' song in their head, courtesy of Fili. You're welcome.

[2] There is a back story regarding the whole Ori and Dwalin thing here that I couldn't fit in the fic – basically, Dwalin is not the type to keep things a secret from his king (he's loyal to a fault, that one), but at the same, he does not want to jeopardize this project by having Thorin know about it and shut it down. It does not help that Phase One is actually working. So…he had a nice long afternoon chat about this with Ori (while trying on the different items that the Dwarf had made for him). Ori suggested that Dwalin should stick to the truth with Thorin and he even handed Dwalin a copy of the pamphlet.

Luckily, the pamphlet was hand copied by Dori (as oppose to Fili and Kili's writing, which Thorin would immediately recognize). Also, the company unanimously voted to remove that bit where Fili and Kili were praising their own good looks…so it made the authors of the story much less obvious.

[3] Thorin secretly liked the fact of being called handsome in the pamphlet, that's why he left it alone. Also, he never finished the pamphlet. He only read the first page of it, which was pretty g-rated. If he bothered to read more, he would've seen all the pg-13 pre-slash bits. The Company totally lucked out there.

Chapter 7 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1474314)

Notes:

Betaed by toraberushimeri. Many many thanks to her and her wonderful work. :)

If you are interested, you can follow me on tumblr. My username is bgtea.

IMPORTANT - The next update for this fic will be in a month. I am going on a vacation. If I make it out of it alive and say, not mauled to death by a mountain lion or something, you shall have your chapter. :D

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_7_endnotes) .)

Part XI. Thorin and Bilbo?

"Nori, please tell Dori that he is the one who's being difficult and that he should not have attacked Master Dwalin so savagely!"

"Nori, tell Ori that *he's* the one who's being completely unreasonable, not me. Maybe, if he wasn't so easily blindsided by Master Dwalin's devious, lecherous ways, I wouldn't have had to defend his honour! Master Dwalin had it coming!"

"Nori, tell Dori that he has been out to get Master Dwalin since that very first meeting! Maybe if he stopped being such a biased, cantankerous Dwarf –"

"Nori, tell Ori that he needs to get his head out of the clouds and –"

"ALRIGHT! ENOUGH!" Nori stood up and roared, the nervous tic in his left eye now very prominent to the rest of the Company members who lay casually scattered in the tent, "I will not be your go-between just because the both of you are too caught up in your feud to talk to each other!"

Dori crossed his arms and turned his head away from his brothers with a sniff of utmost disapproval. The simple gesture was one that Nori had received on a regular basis back in the Blue Mountains and seeing it again automatically made Nori raise his hackles in defence.

Then, he remembered that it wasn't him who had earned his older brother's ire but *Ori* of all people, and the rebelliousness fizzled away into a hollowed sense of bewilderedness.

Seated across from the pair, Ori threw one last glare at his brothers before stubbornly latching on to Dwalin's arm, plastering himself happily along the Dwarf's side. Dwalin passively allowed his arm to be manoeuvred to Ori's liking, doing nothing, except to lace their fingers together after the scribe had settled into a comfortable position.

Dwalin also pointedly ignored Nori's dirty look with determined stoicism.

Look at him and his smug face, *how positively hateful*, Nori thought bitterly. If he had known that exposing Dwalin's less than honourable intention would have led to this sickening display of affection and this exhausting fight between his brothers, he would have thought twice before doing what he had done.

"Come, Master Nori. Let us focus back on the meeting," Bofur's gentle cajoling lured Nori away from his dark mood, and he found himself inadvertently smiling back when the Dwarf handed him a mug of mead. Bofur gave him a friendly pat against the arm, raised his own mug, and clinked it against Nori's.

Leave it to the kind-hearted Master Bofur to make this situation more bearable with his bright attitude.

“If everyone is ready, we can get started with our weekly progress reports, thank you!” Balin, ever the professional, announced sternly from beside his bastard of a brother, and all the Dwarves slowly dragged themselves into a roughly shaped circle. This time, they had chosen to meet in Óin’s spacious tent and had managed to procure enough chairs for everyone in order to prevent any more fights from breaking out. After the last meeting where the mad grab for chairs had turned particularly vicious – Glóin almost had his nose broken and Bofur was very nearly crushed to death by Bombur – the Dwarves had learned their lesson about the chairs.

“Before we begin, I would like to say that I have met with Thorin,” Dwalin unexpectedly called out in his usual gruff tone, his brows furrowed and his expression grim as always. “I have shown him the pamphlet.”

That caught the Company by complete surprise and almost immediately, all of the Dwarves collectively sucked in their breath in horror. From the corner of his eyes, Nori could just about see Fíli dropping his dinner roll from listless fingers in frozen shock. Kíli, who was sitting to his brother’s left, turned to a sickly shade of grey. Those two poor sods would no doubt bear the brunt of their uncle’s temper and they knew it themselves.

Deep, red hot anger coursed its way through his body once Nori had gotten over his shock from this whole reveal. Fighting to maintain his cool poker face, the Dwarf clenched both of his fists tightly and chose to curse vehemently under his breath at Dwalin instead. He should have known from the way that the warrior had protested against the project’s secrecy that he would strike out on his own to do what he believed was right. *Of course*, Dwalin would do the honourable thing and play the loyal guard.

Nori had met his fair share of people like Dwalin who, more often than not, were hired as guards to arrest criminals such as his associates and himself. The journey to Erebor only cemented Nori’s opinion that the warrior was one of those short-sighted, simplistic fools who stubbornly saw the world in terms of black and white rather than the intricate shades of grey that painted reality. People like Dwalin would uphold their duties above all else since it was the *right* thing to do; they would never lower themselves to get their hands dirty even when this was needed to get the real work done.

Men like Dwalin were the complete opposite of Nori, who had long ago tossed away such dubious concepts like right, wrong, and honour. After all, what good is ‘doing the right thing’ or honour when you were starving in the streets?

No, Nori had never liked Dwalin. He liked him a lot less now that that thrice cursed Dwarf was throwing wrenches into his plans and blatantly cuddling up to his baby brother.

“I can’t say that I am surprised at all,” Nori drawled lazily but his eyes flashed dangerously at the warrior. “How kind of you to warn us of the hell that you have brought to our doorstep.”

“If you think that I will betray my king’s trust just for your clever little scheme, then you are sorely mistaken Master Nori. I believe I have warned you about this already,” Dwalin growled back, just as menacingly.

Ori laid a soothing hand on Dwalin’s bicep, glanced nervously between the two quarrelling Dwarves and blurted out, “There won’t be any trouble! King Thorin thinks that the pamphlet carries nothing but harmless gossip.”

“Aye,” Dwalin confirmed, his anger draining away quickly thanks to Ori’s calming influence. This only made Nori all the more annoyed. “Thorin specifically said to leave all future pamphlets alone unless they are damaging to his or Master Baggins’ reputations.”

Fíli and Kíli sagged in obvious relief. “Thank you, sweet merciful Mahal!” Fíli breathed out at the same time that Kíli exclaimed, “Oh thank goodness, we’re too good looking to die!”

“So you see,” Ori forcefully continued over the two princes, his voice pitched in the same kind of false cheeriness that one would use to calm a wild animal, “Dwalin did us a great favour! Now, the king will be less likely to suspect the contents of the pamphlets!”

The Dwarves grumbled amongst themselves but after spending a bit of time deliberating, they grudgingly accepted Ori’s reasoning. Even Dori, who was notoriously known to be difficult, could not find anything to challenge, and from his sour disposition, he was none too happy about it either.

“Now that that’s out of the way, let’s talk about the progress for *That Project*.” Balin reached into the leather satchel that was by the foot of his chair and pulled out a beautifully crafted pen and a small stack of paper. “What did you all think about the camp’s reception to our first pamphlet?” he asked as he started to scribble.

“The Dwarves in the kitchen haven’t stopped talking about it, that’s for sure!” Bombur said, his response slightly muffled by the mouthful of pie he had in mid-chew. As he spoke, the pie crumbs sprayed liberally across the circle,some of them landing on Dori’s lap to his disgust. “They would huddle together and reread the story whenever we had some time to ourselves!”

“The mess hall hasn’t been spared either,” Bofur added excitedly from his seat between his cousin and Nori, “I have never seen Dwarves so distracted from eating! Well done on making the impossible possible!”

Glóin clapped Fíli enthusiastically on the back, almost sending the young Dwarf flying out of his chair. “It looks like your shoddily written version of the quest was a success after all!”

“Hey! I’ll have you know that Fíli and I had to work hard for that!” Kíli laid a steadying hand on his brother and snapped, insulted, “How else did you expect us to portray you lot in such a flattering light?”

The Dwarves glanced at each other discretely in silence for a few seconds. Almost simultaneously, they roared into laughter.

“He’s got a point!”

“The princes had their work cut out for them, what with you lot being so painfully ugly and unimpressive!”

“Speak for yourself. My wife thinks I make one gorgeous Dwarven specimen!”

“Well, that’s got to be true. After all, she couldn’t have married you for your shining personality!”

“Well, with all due respect, hardly anyone can compare when they’re standing next to our King Thorin! He’s a heartbreaker, that king of ours.”

“Aye, it’s not everyone who can pull off the long flowing locks and the perpetually brooding face like our majestic king!”

“I would imagine,” said Óin in his habitually loud and robust manner that effectively cut through the conversations in the room, “that aside from the story being a hit, Young Master Ori also had a hand in the pamphlets’ success. His beautifully drawn image of Bilbo being embraced lovingly by our King at the Carrock has been praised across the camp!”

Ori flushed and ducked his head at the eleven pairs of eyes that were zeroed in on him. “Oh, it’s…er, it’s nothing. It’s just a small image near the corner of the pamphlet. I’m surprised that people even noticed.”

Dwalin snorted disbelievingly, “Of course they would. You are amazing.”

Ori’s face lit up at the compliment and he asked shyly, “Really? You think so?”

And to Nori’s growing horror, Dwalin positively melted – as much as someone like Dwalin could melt anyway – and replied while wearing this dumb and utterly *besotted* look on his equally dumb-looking face, “Yes, I know so.”

The two exchanged shy gazes from beneath their lowered lashes.

Oh for the love of the Valars.

“Yes, yes, Ori is amazing. Can we continue now?” Nori snapped irritably. Dori looked like he was ready to leap over to give Dwalin a second beating, and although Nori wasn’t one to object, they *did* need every Dwarf healthy enough to hand copy the pamphlets. “It looks like Phase One of *That Project* is an undeniable success. Now, we can proceed with Phase Two. Bifur, how are you doing with the new ballad?”

Bifur stood up, brushed himself off calmly, and then promptly launched into a very loud and very spirited answer in Khuzdûl, filled with wild flailing arms and exaggerated motions. He ended his speech in a flourish by tapping his right hand against his heart twice and then tilting his head back to laugh maniacally.

Everyone stared a little at the spectacle.

Nori slowly grinned one of his dark, mischievous grins. “If it’s anything like the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins, it will spread like wildfire,” he chuckled at the thought. Thorin and Bilbo won’t know what hit them, the poor bastards.

“Great,” he continued, “we can launch the ballad first, then the new series of pamphlets a week later. This should give us enough time to finish copying out the last of them. Once those have made it around the camp, Master Glóin can spread the news about the betting pool to reel in participants.”

“That should be easy enough.” Glóin got up from his seat and boasted fiercely, his sudden movement almost causing the mug of mead that he was holding to spill on Fíli if he hadn’t shifted away fast enough. “We can have the Dwarves bet on things like how long it will take for the king to officially announce his intention to court Master Baggins, how many gifts it will take to win the Hobbit over,” he shrugged and added carelessly, “whether or not they are shagging each other’s brains out. That will probably be the most popular one to bet on.”

Glóin grinned unashamedly at Fíli and Kíli’s twin anguished cries. To add insult to injury, he raised his mug in a proud, mocking salute.

“Oh Durin, the *mental picture*,” Fíli groaned miserably.

“Why does everyone want to know if they’re shagging?!” Kíli asked desperately.

“What should we talk about in the second pamphlet? I believe we wanted to focus on the events that have occurred from within the camps.” Balin carried on with all the poise and determination of someone experienced in plowing through meetings, come hell or high water. He paused in his note taking and looked up, “Any suggestions?”

“That’s easy enough!” Óin shouted and Dori and Glóin, who were unfortunate enough to sit beside him, winced at the volume. The old Dwarf adjusted his ear trumpet and spoke softly this time, “We can talk about all those times Master Baggins have spent in the king’s tent, diligently caring for his wounds. I have seen them awkwardly dance around each other enough times to write a novella about it!”

“Bilbo not only brings Uncle his medicine, but he also brings him food and tea.” Fíli volunteered and his brother nodded fervently in support. “They like to spend their evenings in each other’s company. Kíli and I can hear them laughing easily enough from outside the tent!”

"It's like clockwork! Every night by dinner time, Bilbo will be there." Kíli paused briefly and corrected himself, "Except for Sundays. Sundays are for brunches and Bilbo will show up at Uncle's tent with a platter of food and a fresh pot of tea."

Dwalin raised a suspicious brow at the two. "And how do you come about this information? Was that what the both of you were doing that time I caught you skulking outside of your uncle's tent?"

Fíli and Kíli exchanged guilty looks. "Well," Fíli hesitated, "our Mother wanted –"

Balin pinched the bridge of his nose and quickly raised his hand to interrupt. "Never mind, we do not want to know."

"In any case, what Masters Fíli and Kíli said about the food is true." Bombur passed down a plate of diced cheese to Bifur, who proceeded to grab some by the fistful. "Master Baggins visited the kitchens regularly and he would select the king's favourites without fail. It's all rather sweet!"

"Let's not forget about the extravagant gifts that the king had offered Master Baggins to thank him for his services!" Bofur shook his head in disbelief and muttered, "Golden chariots crafted by the king himself and fleets of ponies!"

Bifur grunted and signed rapidly in Iglishmêk.

"That's right, the King offered to teach Master Baggins Khuzdûl too!" Bofur agreed readily with his cousin.

"Alright, I think I've got our story," Nori stood up and declared authoritatively. He cleared his throat, pitched his voice low and started to narrate: "King Thorin has sustained grave injuries during the battle and Master Baggins spent countless days by his bedside tending to his wounds. When the king woke up, he was so touched by our Hobbit's loyalty and brave actions that he decided to make peace with Master Baggins over their past…ah, transgressions."

Nori gave a very pointed look to the Company members and the message was clearly received – the Arkenstone business will be edited out. The problems that sprung from that situation seemed to be resolved and from Bilbo and King Thorin's current flourishing relationship, they already made peace with each other over that issue as well. The last thing that the Dwarves wanted to do now was to reopen that can of worms.

"Slowly, they rekindle their friendship. At first, Master Baggins would drop by to bring His Majesty his medicine but as the visits progress, the King and the Hobbit would talk more and more –"

"And without either of them realizing, their conversations gradually grew more intimate as well." Dori finished the sentence smoothly, having understood where his brother was going with this. "Master Baggins started to visit the tent more often and he would bear gifts for the king. He would steal into the kitchens to sneak in some of King Thorin's favourite dishes to alleviate His Majesty's dark mood from being stuck in his sick bed day and night."

Nori nodded. A part of him was relieved to know that despite all of their differences, his older brother was still one of the few people in Middle-Earth who could pick up on his thought processes quickly. "Right you are. By that time, the King and Master Baggins had begun to trust each other deeply. This was clearly proven when His Majesty asked Master Baggins for his help with his paperwork, which we all know he guards almost jealously."

"And thank goodness for that!" Fíli shouted with glee. "Uncle may think that he is being clever by hiding it from me and Kíli, but we know about the mountains of paperwork!"

Kíli nudged his brother with his elbow and whispered conspiringly, "If it means we can get away without doing any work, he can keep on thinking that he's being clever!"

Balin scoffed, "I doubt Thorin would appreciate the both of you interrupting his alone time with Master Baggins anyway. Besides, they clearly spend more time joking around with each other than doing any actual work." The Dwarf clucked disapprovingly. The countless times he had walked into the tent only to see his king and the burglar giggling like a pair of school children came to mind. Honestly, those two!

"Dwarves, if we can all focus again," Nori said, amused by the brief exchange and at the ensuing silence, he continued, "The King soon realized that he had never thanked the Hobbit and he would very, very much like to show his appreciation, and *that*, my friends, is the start of His Majesty's epic quest of lavishing Bilbo with ridiculous, over-the-top, overly extravagant gifts." Nori's enthusiastic storytelling earned a round a chuckle from the Dwarves.

"Unfortunately, it is a quest that the King failed drastically what with the Hobbit refusing everything except that one, small teapot. He had to get Master Balin to help him for that one so clearly, that victory did not count." Nori's smile turned positively evil when he added next, "And then, he had the Hobbit move in with him, all for the sake of protecting Master Baggins, or so he claimed."

"HE WHAT?!"

Nori preened at the attention of all the Dwarves gaping at him, basking in the delicious satisfaction of the chaos he brought to the tent from his well-timed and devastating reveal.

Not all of the Dwarves. Fíli and Kíli seemed to have known this already, Nori concluded, his eyes narrowing on the two princes. They were sitting quietly in their chair – *almost too quietly,* came Nori's stray observation – and they were twiddling their thumbs, of all things.

They were entirely way too calm for this.

Come to think about it, Fíli and Kíli seem to have collected a disturbing amount of information about what was going on between Bilbo and their Uncle. They certainly have contributed a lot of their knowledge to this meeting alone. Nori supposed that he shouldn't have been surprised by that development. Their Mother's sharp mind coupled with Fíli and Kíli's natural talent at being nosy would make them a team to be reckoned with for gathering intelligence.

How interesting. The thief made a mental reminder to swap notes with them later on to see what else he might have missed.

"When did this happen?" Balin asked, gobsmacked. From his left, Dwalin was just as equally taken aback by the news if the surprised raise of his eyebrows was anything to go by. "Are you certain that that is the case, Master Nori? Perhaps Master Baggins accidentally fell asleep while helping the king with his work, or it could be –"

"There were additional furnishings crammed into the tent, Master Balin," Nori interrupted smoothly, "a desk, a small chair, and a cot tucked away in the corner. And when I asked the king about the cot, he was very forthright in telling me about the Hobbit's new living arrangements."

"Never would've guessed Thorin to be so bold," Dwalin grunted, but the relaxed way he kept himself draped in his chair gave away his approval. "Shacking up with the Hobbit without wasting any time. He never was one to do anything by halves."

"A little too bold, if you ask me! He hasn't even presented Master Baggins with his three presents and they haven't exchanged their love beads," Dori groused. He shot a poisonous look at Dwalin. "And the worst of all, he had not asked the head of Master Baggins' family for *permission*."

Dwalin opened his mouth to retort but Ori beat him to the punch, "Well maybe, the head of Master Baggins' family is a difficult Hobbit with an unfair bias against Dwarves and he shouldn't be the one to decide Master Baggins' happiness! Maybe we should just hang the rules!"

"Ori is rather terrifying right now," Kíli whispered in awe to his brother, "I'm glad we never made him this angry."

"What the king should have done does not matter," Nori interjected loudly to stop yet another argument between his brothers. Mahal knows that he'll need a stiff drink after this meeting. "Also, the king doesn't see himself courting Master Baggins. As far as he's concerned, he is only providing a safe refuge for the Hobbit. We should be clear on that for the story."

Glóin shook himself out of his stupor and muttered none too quietly to his brother, "At the rate we're going with our story, we are making our King sound like such an oblivious idiot." He looked up and saw how everyone had gone silent to stare at him. "What?"

"Yes, well, if the shoe fits," Balin said flatly. Never one to feel much shame, Glóin shrugged back, entirely unconcerned by his peer's judgement.

"Well then," Nori stood up and clapped his hands once to sum up the end of the meeting, "I believe that's more than enough material to work with for Phase Two for now. Time to get to work!"

"I discovered something quite interesting today," Bilbo said as a way of greeting the moment he stepped foot into Thorin's warm tent. The Hobbit's bland, neutral tone made the Dwarf look up suspiciously from his never-ending piles of paperwork.

Brace yourself, Thorin. This might be dangerous.

"What is it?" Thorin asked, hoping that he came off casual sounding. He grabbed the warm cup of tea on his desk and took a small, unhurried sip to further play up his image of being cool and collected. It would not be wise to show how easily Bilbo could make him feel nervous. The Hobbit would never let him live it down.

"Remember how we had that conversation about the Ballad of Bilbo Baggins a couple of months back?"

Thorin frowned in confusion. "Yes? What about it?"

"There is a new ballad that's out and you'll never guess what it's called."

Thorin stared blankly at Bilbo for a few seconds before his eyes widened, realization dawning. "No," he breathed out.

"Yes! *The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield!*" Bilbo exclaimed and Thorin promptly pressed his fist against his lips to stifle the bubble of laughter that was rising in his throat. He failed horribly; the stray chuckles that had managed to escape gave way to full-scale laughter.

"Is it as bad as the *Ballad of Bilbo Baggins*? Please tell me it's not as bad." Thorin asked a little desperately when he had the chance to catch his breath. In a futile attempt to save himself from the humiliation he pleaded, "Have mercy! Can I not hear about this?"

"Oh no, you're not escaping from this that easily!" Bilbo crossed his arms and gave Thorin an unrepentant smirk, obviously relishing in Thorin's embarrassment. This only confirmed the king's belief that underneath his sweet demeanour,

his Hobbit was *pure* evil. “I sat there and listened to the whole thing thrice just so I could remember enough of it to share this with you! You are going to listen to me talk about this in all of its horrible sordid details!”

Thorin rolled his eyes and sighed in mock resignation, “Well, if you feel that strongly about it, Master Hobbit then I *suppose*I could indulge you just this once.”

Bilbo rubbed his hands together excitedly. Thorin knew that the Hobbit was bursting at the seams to share this with him from the way he had completely ignored the empty chair beside him, opting instead to pace animatedly. “It is a retelling about our quest but it has a few changes to them. Apparently, I am a brave, cunning, adorable little Hobbit with a heart of gold, and for the record, I do not approve of being called ‘little’ or ‘adorable’, thank you very much!”

He paused to rock back and forth on his heels. “You, on the other hand, are the great and mighty Thorin Oakenshield whose majesty is only enhanced by your skill with a sword, your unwavering dedication to do the best for your people, as well as your long flowing locks, and piercing blue eyes.”

It took all of Thorin’s inner strength not to flinch. “Long flowing locks and piercing blue eyes?” He repeated, testing the words on his tongue. Nope, they did not sound any less ridiculous when he had said them. “Where are they coming up with these sorts of things?”

Bilbo gave him a quizzical look, opening and closing his mouth a few times and stammered, “Well, it’s just, you do have this presence to you. A striking one, really. Rather hard to ignore you when you walk into a room.” When he saw the growing smile on Thorin’s face, he rolled his eyes and went back to his pacing, “Oh stop looking so pleased with yourself!”

“Why thank you, Master Baggins.” Thorin practically purred out, feeling inexplicably satisfied. He shifted fluidly to lean into the padded armrest of his chair, propping his face up with a fist, “You flatter me with your compliments –”

“That was clearly a lapse of judgement on my part. Honestly, I wasn’t sure what I was thinking when I said that!”

“– I mean, by all means, do continue to call me handsome! And in such an eloquent manner too! Be still my beating heart.”

“You are impossible, Thorin Oakenshield, and I am continuing with this story whether you want to or not.”

Thorin smirked widely and waved a regal hand in the air in a motion that told Bilbo to continue.

“As I was saying,” Bilbo huffed, “They talked about you and me, or at least some bizarre reinterpretation of us. The rest of it is about all the supposed greatness we had accomplished together. Apparently, we form quite a legendary partnership, one that ‘puts all other alliances in the history of Middle-Earth to shame’, what with our uncanny ability to escape from certain death time and time again.”

“So far, the ballad does not sound that bad.” Thorin mused. He immediately realized his mistake from the way that Bilbo’s eyes lit up in challenge, and he watched with dawning horror when the Hobbit, with his hands clasped behind his back, began to recite in a clear, loud voice:

“The Dwarven king had swept in the Hobbit’s home,
To seek aid in reclaiming his kingdom’s gold.
With his long flowing locks and his piercing blue eyes,
The majestic king was a sight to behold.”

Thorin coughed awkwardly to disguise his grimace. “Alright,” he finally admitted, “that was pretty terrible.” He wasn’t ready to let Bilbo win this round though, so he added stubbornly, “At least it’s only the one verse that I had to suffer through. This ballad is still not as bad as the *Ballad of Bilbo Baggins*. For one, there were no references about fuzzy, woolly toes.”

“That may be true, but there were certainly *a lot* more in this ballad that went on about your rugged handsomeness.” Bilbo countered with a wicked little smile no less, “I just couldn’t remember how the other verses went. There was something in there about your ‘strong, manly arms and impressive build that made the maidens swoon’. Whoever wrote that had quite the imagination.”

Thorin shuddered. It sounded a lot like one of those short stories that Dís had written in her youth when she was trying her hands at becoming a writer, if Thorin remembered correctly. Frerin and him were often bullied into reading her ‘works’, which were more like thinly-veiled smut of dubious quality, to their great embarrassment. It was a lesson that taught Thorin to be terrified of his sister’s mind.

The Dwarven king groaned deeply, burying his face into his hands in abject misery. “I just…why?” he asked, flabbergasted.

Bilbo walked over and gave Thorin a pat on the back and the Dwarf found himself automatically leaning against the touch, seeking the warmth from Bilbo’s soft hand. “If it makes you feel better, there were a couple of verses dedicated to calling the Elves ‘tree-shagging, scum-sucking sods’, among other things.”

Thorin turned to the Hobbit and looked noticeably happier. “I stand corrected. This ballad is wonderful and whoever wrote it is a genius.”

Bilbo chuckled, his fond expression highlighted by the soft curl to his lips and the warm glow of his eyes. “Should have figured that that was all it took to win you over.” The Hobbit sighed and added endearingly, “You’re hopeless, utterly hopeless. What will I do with you?”

That last sentence was murmured so quietly that if Thorin had not seen his lips move, he would not have heard the words. Bilbo’s smile widened and he brushed a loose strand of hair away from Thorin’s face, tucking it neatly behind his ear with his free hand.

Thorin dimly registered the spots of heat that Bilbo’s hands had left along his back and by the curve of his jaw; he found himself craving for the Hobbit’s touch not for the first time since Bilbo had moved into the tent. Just as he finished that line of thought, Bilbo began to rub small circles on his back, slowly spiralling his touch from his spine out towards his shoulder blades. Thorin automatically dropped his shoulders, losing his proud posture. He wondered if Bilbo even realized his effect on him.

“And you know what else they are calling us now?” Bilbo’s voice was as soft as ever. The pleasant lilt of his Westron accent was all the more apparent and Thorin felt utterly, hopelessly mesmerized.

“What is it?” he asked, voice gone hoarse.

The Hobbit’s smile morphed back into a familiar smirk, one that was so quintessentially *Bilbo Baggins*. “They are calling our partnership, *Team Bagginshield*.”

“Team Bagginshield?” Thorin laughed under his breath and he revelled in the look of happiness on Bilbo’s face. “That’s absolutely horrible. I would’ve given us a name that wasn’t such a mouthful.”

Bilbo tilted his head inquisitively and Thorin felt himself reaching over, as if in a trance, to place his large hands over Bilbo’s hips. He pulled the boneless, unresisting Hobbit closer and angled his head to look up into Bilbo’s warm brown eyes.

“I would have chosen to call us *Thilbo,* of course.” They were close, so close that Thorin could smell the natural scents of earth and grass that cling to his Hobbit like a second skin.

Bilbo gave a small huff of laughter, stopping his hand in its soothing motion on Thorin’s back. Instead, he clenched lightly around the rough-spun cotton of Thorin’s shirt. “Thilbo is just as ridiculous sounding as Bagginshield,” he breathed out.

Bilbo licked his lips and Thorin felt heat flooding through him at the flash of tongue against pink, soft lips. It would be so easy for Thorin to just lean forward a little and pull the Hobbit down towards him until the they were pressed flushed together, the space between them nonexistence, until they could just –

“Uncle! Are you in there? Balin wanted us to leave this with you!”

The jarring sound of knocking shattered the moment of intimacy. Bilbo and Thorin released their hold and sprang away from each other in reflex.

Bilbo cleared his throat, his cheek dusted with light pink. “You should get the door. It wouldn’t be good to keep Fíli and Kíli waiting,” he said awkwardly. He gave a weak little smile and turned away abruptly before the Dwarf could respond.

Thorin tried to ignore the sharp pang of disappointment amidst the overwhelming confusion in his mind. *What on Middle-Earth had just happened?*

Fíli and Kíli’sSuper Secret Awesome Spy Report #6

Note: We decided to continue with our mission for the sake of research! How else can we expect to write our story if we don’t have the facts straight? *(Nori was the one who convinced us that we needed to keep our efforts up in case there are any new developments! That way, if we find anything interesting, we may be able to add that to our writing.)*

There’s that, but I also think that Nori’s just being nosy like our Mother. He’s probably interested in the potential gossip material that we can share in our upcoming meetings.

(I don’t blame him for being eager though. I mean, I would be more than happy to spend the meeting time, listening to gossip as opposed to being the voice of reason for his brothers. Haven’t you seen the pained look on his face whenever he had to break up yet another fight between Ori and Dori?)

I never realized how downright vicious the Ri brothers could be. I’m so glad that we’re not like that.

(You’re just lucky that I am the best little brother on Middle-Earth!)

And such a humble one too!

Targets: Bilbo and Uncle, although now that they are sleeping in the same tent, Bilbo is definitely spending a lot more time with Uncle than never before in the privacy of their own space. We will need to find a better way to listen in on

them if we want to know what's going on. Staring pointlessly at the outside of their tent isn't cutting it anymore!

Goal: To find out what's really going on inside the tent in the name of research! *(Mother will be happy to see how dedicated we are to doing our job! She'll be happier still at the potential blackmail material that she will gain after we tell her what we have found.)* On the other hand, if Uncle finds out that we've been secretly snitching on him to Mother, I can't begin to imagine what he will do to us. Maybe, he'll try to have us arrested on charges like 'conspiring against the king.'

(At least that charge is a real one! Remember all those times when he threatened us with ones that were completely made up just to get us to leave him alone?)

Note: Make sure to ask Mother for some sort of immunity for the next time that Uncle threatens to have us arrested on bogus charges like 'disturbing the king's peace on a Sunday when he finally gets to have a lie-in', or 'making an uncle's life a complete misery by being nuisances'.

Impact of mission if successful:

1. Mother will be happy and we all get to live!
2. Nori will have something to distract himself with instead of having to focus on being his brothers' peace-keeper, *(his twitch under his eye might die down a bit)*. He might be willing to show us some nifty spymaster tricks out of gratitude as well, if we can negotiate it out of him.
3. The next meeting with the Company will prove to be entertaining for everyone.
4. We will have a fantastically written story that is so beautiful, it will even make the Elves weep at the sight of it!

Day 6

Meeting time duration: This afternoon, after lunch at one o'clock

Summary of events:

We spotted Bilbo leaving the kitchens with a tray of smoked meat and we knew right away that he was bringing food to Uncle. *(Bilbo is ridiculously predictable! Not to mention, he is definitely spoiling Uncle by bringing him the things that he likes all the time. Can you imagine what will happen if he suddenly just stops? Uncle will be even more unmanageable, especially since he is now used to this sort of fancy treatment!)* If that ever happens, I will gladly steal a pony, ride out to the Elvenking's lair, and hide under his ridiculous moose-inspired throne just to escape from Uncle's wrath. Where would you go, Kíli?

(That's an easy choice. I will hide under Ori's bed, now that I have seen how scary he could be. Besides, I have the added bonus of Dwalin's presence! It's like a two for one deal!)

We followed the Hobbit back to Uncle's tent but we were surprised to see Bilbo leaving not twenty minutes later after he had dropped off the food. He was impeccably dressed as ever, but hewas flushed to the point where the tips of his ears were red. Normally, Bilbo and Uncle would spend at least forty minutes dining together, so to see Bilbo scampering away like that and in the state that he was in was strange to say the least.

(Speaking of people acting strange, didn't you notice how peculiar Uncle was behaving went we went to deliver Balin's papers yesterday?) It's rather hard not to notice. Normally, when we deliver anything to Uncle, he'd be asking a million and one questions while carefully examining every hole and crevasse of the delivered item. I was honestly thinking that we would have to stand there for ten minutes, trying to calm his suspicious nature. *(True! And if he runs out of things to ask about the parcel, he would normally default to asking us a barrage of curt, one-liner questions like, 'have you eaten?', 'have you trained?', 'have you healed properly?', and his personal favourite: 'what did you break?' We got none of that yesterday.)*

I like how he stopped asking us 'if we broke anything', and instead, made the wise assumption that yes, we have already broken something and will only continue our habit of breaking things every time we meet. Clearly, Uncle knows us entirely too well.

You're right though, Kíli. Now that I think about it, Uncle seemed entirely distracted when we showed up to his tent yesterday. He only grabbed the papers, mumbled his thanks, and popped back inside. The whole transaction took maybe a minute if that.

(How odd. Do you think it has something to do with Bilbo?)

It probably does. We'll have to keep a lookout on how the both of them behave around each other the next time we get to sit in a meeting.

Bilbo was not in the mood for whatever oddity that was going on in the camp, not today when he had his mess of feelings to sort through.

A mess of convoluted, Thorin-shaped, Thorin-sized feelings, his mind supplied unhelpfully and he fought against groaning pathetically out loud.

“Is something the matter, Bilbo?”

Bilbo turned and gave a reassuring smile to a worried Thorin, who was seated beside him. “Sorry, it’s nothing. Just a migraine, is all,” he lied easily and when Thorin continued to look concerned, he admitted quietly, “I’ve been having problems falling asleep.”

Because I have my mind full of thoughts about you. Bilbo really wished he could mute the annoying little voice in his head.

Thorin frowned deeper, “If you are not feeling well, you can return to our tent and rest. I have more than enough aid with manning the sign up procedure.”

For a second, Bilbo was tempted to accept the offer. He casted a quick glance around the tent and sure enough, everything was already laid out for the day-long event. A long wooden table, one that Bilbo suspected was borrowed from the mess hall from the suspicious fork indentures on its surface, was placed near the wall, leaving enough space for those who are manning the desk – four Dwarves and one Hobbit – to squeeze by with their chairs. Each seated person was given different pages that listed the available dates where Dwarves can register to work at the farms, and enough writing utensils to keep the process uninterrupted. Bilbo and Thorin had been the first to jot their names down the moment their stations were set up, with Bilbo signing up to work for almost every day and Thorin stubbornly following the Hobbit’s example. Luckily, Balin was able to talk his king into reducing his hours.

They were prepared to open the floodgates to the Dwarves outside and Bilbo did not doubt that it will be a long day, or at least until Dáin arrives to replace Thorin at the sign up station. Still, he promised Thorin to help and he will not leave him to face the crowd alone.

A burst of loud laughter broke his reverie and Bilbo glanced at the source of the noise. Fíli and Kíli had a red-faced, embarrassed-looking Ori sandwiched between them and by the desperate way the scribe was shrinking into himself, poor Ori wanted out of this miserable situation. Bilbo rolled his eyes at the spectacle.

He was definitely not leaving Thorin alone to the mercy of his two nephews either.

“It’s alright, Thorin. We’ll be sitting here all day at the desk anyway. It’s hardly a taxing job.” He mustered as much confidence as he could in his grin. “Besides, I am afraid for the state of the tent if I left,” Bilbo gestured to the three rowdy, young Dwarves in the corner. Ori was now cowering in the corner, clutching his leather bound journal to his chest like a shield.

Thorin relaxed at his answer but he wasn’t fully placated. “You will tell me the moment the migraine gets worse,” he commanded and at Bilbo’s nod, the last of his worries visibly dissipated. “Good.”

Bilbo dropped his smile the moment Thorin turned his attention away to bark at his nephews. *By Eru*, the Dwarf’s presence was driving him mad. He had not felt this flustered around anyone, not since when he was a young, impressionable Hobbit who believed himself to be in love. Funny how the situation is repeating itself now after a few decades of self-imposed bachelorhood, except his object of affection was a surly Dwarven king of all people rather than a soft Hobbit lass.

Stranger yet, the thought of having any romantic feelings towards Thorin had never crossed his mind, at least not until that incident at the tent a couple of days ago. Now, all he could think about was that moment of intimacy, trying to understand where this flood of feelings was coming from, to the point where he was driving himself to sleeplessness.

Maybe, he had always subconsciously felt something for the Dwarf, but had stubbornly ignored this in favour of completing the quest with his life and limbs intact. Maybe, he had slowly fallen for the king afterwards, in the silence of the tent when Thorin was weak in his sickbed, but his determination to do right by Bilbo and by his people was as strong as ever. Either way, that *incident* – and by the makers, he couldn’t even address the incident properly in his head without flushing – served as a massive wake-up call.

The truth remained: Bilbo Baggins most definitely had feelings for Thorin Oakenshield that go beyond that of friendship. He wasn’t sure if it was love that he was feeling just yet, but if given more time, Bilbo was certain that his fondness for Thorin would only continue to grow.

The next important question is, what is he going to do about it?

Absolutely nothing, that’s what, Bilbo decided resolutely but not without bitterness. He wasn’t even sure if Thorin reciprocated his affections. After the *incident*, the Dwarf had acted as if nothing had happened and had gone straight to work on the papers he had received from Fíli and Kíli. He continued to act completely normal in the following days and Bilbo had not found the courage to talk to him about it.

And how should I bring this up anyway? Bilbo thought sarcastically, *Should I have said: ‘Hello Thorin, remember that time where we were practically whispering sweet nothings to each other? Did you have thatsame urge as I did to give you the snogging of your life? I sure would like that, please and thank you!’*

If anything, it was Bilbo who started to act funny. He suddenly noticed all the little details about Thorin that he would otherwise have taken for granted: Thorin's deep, rumbling chuckle that never ceased to bring a smile to his own face, the way the Dwarf's hair would become a tangled mess every morning, the gentleness of his battle-scarred hands, the warmth in his gaze…all of these had sent Bilbo flushing embarrassingly. He even had to kip out on lunch the other day so that he won't make a complete ass out of himself.

Just as he was about to groan in shame at the memory, a voice in front of him called out brusquely, "Master Hobbit, when will you be working on the farm?"

Bilbo quickly looked up from his lap, staring at the large, rough-looking Dwarf in front of him in utter surprise.

"Ah, sorry?" he said intelligently. It was more polite than him asking, 'When did you get here?' which was what Bilbo had really meant.

"This is where I sign up to work for the farm, yes?" the Dwarf repeated, more slowly this time as if he was speaking to someone particularly slow.

"Oh...oh! The sign up, yes!" Bilbo plastered what he hoped was a pleasant, disarming smile but to no avail. The Dwarf remained unimpressed. Bilbo fought against the rising blush of embarrassment, "Yes, this is the right location! Thank you for offering your help. Which date will work best for you?"

"It depends," the Dwarf said vaguely, as if he was completely uninterested with that thread of the conversation. Instead, he repeated gruffly, "When will you be working on the farm?"

Bilbo blinked in surprise. "Uh, I will be working pretty much every day for the upcoming months."

"And what about our king, will he be accompanying you?"

"Yes?" Bilbo raised an inquisitive brow at the unexpected question. "Although he won't be there every day, he will still be showing up extensively."

The Dwarf nodded solemnly. "Master Hobbit, show me the weeks where the both of you are scheduled to work together."

Bilbo wordlessly pulled out the pages and pointed the dates that had both his and Thorin's name written under them. The Dwarf grunted, plucked a pen on the table, dipped it in the ink pot and started to scrawl his name rapidly on the page.

"There are more dates to choose from if you would…alright, never mind." Bilbo trailed off when it was clear that the Dwarf was not listening, and the Hobbit was left trying not to stare at the odd Dwarf in awkward silence.

He failed.

Finally, the Dwarf placed his pen down, scanned his sheet over one last time, and dipped his head forward. "Master Hobbit," he greeted tonelessly and before Bilbo could thank him, he had spun around and stalked for the exit, roughly pushing aside the numerous Dwarves that were in his way.

Bilbo blinked again. Out of nagging curiosity, he glanced down at the signup sheet.

The Dwarf, (apparently he was called Frár, Bilbo noted) had put his name down for what was equivalent to a month's worth of work, all conveniently on the same dates where he and Thorin were on the field together.

Huh.

He couldn't have been staring confusedly at the sheet for more than a minute when another Dwarf appeared.

"Master Baggins!" the newcomer cried jovially and boldly reached across the table to shake Bilbo's hand in enthusiasm, to the Hobbit's surprise. "It's so good to finally meet you in person! I have heard all about your adventure, and I must say, if you could pardon my boldness, that you are a lot braver than you look! Oh, that's not to imply that you look like the cowardly sort, not at all!"

The Dwarf happily continued in his rambling, all the while still shaking Bilbo's hand, "It's just that you are exceptionally brave is all. We all think so, all the lads from my group. We're the ones excavating the diamond mines of Erebor! They're some of the bravest people I know, so for them to think that you're brave, well, that's got to mean something! Oh, wait until I tell them that I got to meet you in person! They will be livid with – "

"Master Dwarf," Thorin said calmly, but with an undertone of pure ice, "if you could let go of Master Baggins' hand now, that would be much appreciated."

The Dwarf yelped and promptly released Bilbo. "Begging your pardon, your Majesty, I do not mean to overstep my bound, your Majesty! Please forgive me, your Majesty!" he quickly bowed multiple times in succession.

"Yes, yes that's quite alright, and – look, will you stop that already?" Thorin sighed, and with an air of exasperation, he said to the Dwarf, "Let's just continue with the sign up."

"Right away, your Majesty!"

He turned to an amused looking Bilbo and asked, no less enthusiastic than before, "If it is not too much of an inconvenience, may I see the dates when you and the king are working together?"

From Erebor, 2942.

To my honourable sister Dís,

How goes your health and your business? I trust that your hard work has paid off. At the very least, please tell me that you have outsold your Elven competitors if you insist on "dominating Middle-Earth, one bottle at the time," as I recall you saying.

The situation in Erebor has oddly been stable thus far. We are in the process of recruiting Dwarves to work on the farms and the response we received was…surprising. Truth be told, I was not expecting much enthusiasm for the project and I was fully prepared to throw in some additional incentives to lure out the Dwarves, but it would seem like I had completely underestimated the people's response.

Believe it or not, there was an actual line up at the tent. The Dwarves were particularly interested in working for long stretches at the time, especially for the dates where Master Baggins and I would be present in the field together. Indeed, a lot of the Dwarves had flat-out asked to be put on the same days for which the both of us had also signed up. I can't begin to imagine why they would make such an odd request. If I were to hazard a guess, I would imagine that this has something to do with the release of the new *Ballad of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield* that apparently accredited the quest's success to our team work. Perhaps the Dwarves are curious and wanted to see for themselves what Master Baggins and I would be like working together.

I am glad to say that the tension within the camp, the one that was sprung from my decision to place Dwarves in the farms, had cooled significantly. At least that's one problem dealt with. Now I can focus on keeping an eye out on Dáin.

How much longer will it take for the first batch of Blue Mountain Dwarves to arrive at Erebor? I would very much like to have more men in the camp whose loyalty I can count on.

- Thorin

To my dear brother Thorin,

What is this I am reading? Not a single word of sarcasm that was directed at me? Well, never in a million years would I have thought to see this day. Master Baggins' ways must have rubbed off on you!

~~I had hoped for Master Baggins to have rubbed off more than his good behaviour on you, but one cannot expect too much, I suppose.~~

Just to let you know, I will find a way to preserve your letter as proof that Thorin Oakenshield can be polite and dare I say, pleasant?

I am doing well, brother, as healthy and hale as ever before. Yes, I am outselling my Elven competitors and I have taken the liberty to gloat about it in great lengths at a local fair that I had recently attended. The Elves were not pleased, and were less impressed when I had addressed them in my speech as "my honoured Elven colleagues whose multiple, brilliant talents do not include making a proper drink, but at least you tried!"

Their pinched, unamused expressions had made my week.

I am thinking of expanding the varieties of drinks to produce. How do you feel about honey mead?

As for your situation in Erebor, I am pleased to hear that the anger among the Dwarves has cooled significantly and at the Dwarves' very enthusiastic response in seeing you and Bilbo working together in the fields. I'm sure that they have no other intention but to see how well the both of you…work together.

At least you will no longer have to worry about the Dwarven camp tearing itself apart from the infighting. I would imagine that Dáin and his advisors are also pleased with this development. After all, I'm sure he realized as much as you did that a divided camp is more vulnerable to outside threats, which would explain why he was so eager to work with you up to this point.

I definitely would continue to keep an eye on him and his men though, just in case. You are still in a vulnerable situation, what with you being surrounded by men who sworn their fealty to Dáin, first and foremost.

A group of thirty Blue Mountain Dwarves should be arriving at Erebor in about three weeks time and a second group should be arriving in another month after that. Expect more of your own workers to arrive during late spring to early summer. Hopefully, we will have enough of our men to match the number in Dáin's army so that you will once again be surrounded by your loyal subjects.

I have included a list detailing all the workers and supplies that are arriving your way for the next three months. Please let me know if there is anything else you need.

Your most wonderful (and filthy rich) sister,

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

Notes:

A/N:

I guess this counts as good news to some, but I have definitely revised the length of this story and have decided that there's no way for me to wrap everything up in 8 chapters. At the moment, I'm thinking that there will be 9 chapters overall, but we shall see about that. Chances are, it might be longer than that. You all are familiar with my inability to write short chapters by now, so it shouldn't come off as a surprise, haha!

Also, I know I promised some of you that epic shit will be happening this chapter. Clearly, that wasn't the case since I decided to add character building tidbits in there. It will be happening next chapter, I hope. ;)

Thank you again to everyone who's commented, reviewed, kudosed, bookmarked and favourited. Hopefully, I have gotten back to all of you (I like replying to you guys!) and I am sorry if I missed anyone! Rest assured, I read all of your comments and I cannot be any more thankful for them. Stay awesome, you guys.

Chapter Notes:

[1] Finally, there is some progress with Bilbo/Thorin, although Thorin likes to be difficult and Bilbo is insecure. More about Thorin's POV in the next chapter!

[2] The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield was mentioned as a joke in Chapter 2...except now, it's actually happening. I know, it's been so long!

[3] Fili and Kili are horrible little cock-blocking shits. I'm sorry.

[4] The Dwarves are fighting to work on the days when Bilbo and Thorin will also be working together in the fields. They are hoping to see all the drama and UST in person. It's like a real life soap opera, waiting to happen in front of their eyes! Who will pass up on an opportunity of a life time like that?

[5] Bagginshield, Thilbo, honey mead - kudos to darthstitch for the inspiration. :D

[6] GUYS! CHECK THIS EPIC FANART OF SAINT-NORI (Patron saint of Bagginshield). Major thanks to feignedsobriquet on tumblr. She's amazing. http://feignedsobriquet.tumblr.com/post/47628881544

Chapter 8 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1582626)

Notes:

Hello my dears! I am back from my vacation! Sorry for the slight delay! I was unsatisfied with this chapter and I had to rewrite several scenes before finding them acceptable. The last thing I want is to submit something that I find subpar. To make it up to you, I've made this chapter extra long (the longest in this fic, in fact!)

I hope you will enjoy it!

Edited by the wonderful toraberushimeri, who has to sift through pages of this and make it beautiful. Many, many, many thanks!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_8_endnotes) .)

Part XII. Everyone Working at the Farms

Thorin had always placed his considerably large pride in his courage and his ability to act boldly in difficult situations. It was, after all, one of the few qualities of kingship that he had possessed naturally since he was a child.

"Remember, a king needs to be able to recognize the time for action," his father had lectured carefully in what seemed like a lifetime ago when Thorin was still the only child of the family. The timbre of his voice had faded into a pale echo of what it once was in Thorin's mind along with the memory of his mother's smiling face. "Once his decision is made, the king must act decisively and without hesitation. His loyal subjects must be able to follow their king in confidence."

Ever the opportunist, Thráin would then slip in extra lessons on Dwarven history and war tactics, both of which were topics that Thorin had strongly disliked.

"But you see, my son," his father had answered at Thorin's petulant complaints with a rare smile that lightened the heavy lines on his face, "learning about the history of our people will guard against repeating the foolish mistakes of the

past." His father's eyes gleamed, "As for the war tactics, you will be surprised by how translatable this knowledge can be in other manners…such as in courtship."

Thorin only wished that he had paid more attention to his lessons. Otherwise, he might not be stuck in this idiotic predicament that he had successfully placed himself in.

"Good morning Dwarves, thank you for your help this morning!" Bilbo Baggins chirped brightly from on top of an upside down wooden crate. The Hobbit rocked on his heels in obvious excitement, "Today, I will show you how to properly prepare the soil for the different crops that we will be planting in this area. If I can just have your attention during this brief demonstration, we can get started immediately!"

The answering groans from the bleary-eyed Dwarven crowd were lacklustre at best.

Thorin stifled a huge yawn with his hand in vain. He could understand their sentiment all too clearly. Waking up at the break of dawn to travel to the fields of Dale for the sole purpose of *farming* of all things was not his idea of a fun morning either. He yawned widely again, this time having given up on any sense of decorum. It was not as if anyone would notice anyway, not from his partially hidden position next to Bilbo and definitely not when the rest of the Dwarves looked like they could fall asleep while standing up.

A quick glance at Dwalin and Glóin, who were standing protectively at the other side of Bilbo, showed him that they too were as equally bored as he was. The two of them had resorted to using their hammer and axe to prop themselves upright.

Bilbo, in contrast, was positively brimming with energy to the point where he could barely keep still.

Thorin should know. He had effectively spent most of the last ten minutes staring stupidly at his Hobbit.

The Dwarven king's gaze flickered back to Bilbo's deft hands as he animatedly mimed out different ways to best till the land. He traced his eyes along the length of Bilbo's arms and his deceptively slight shoulders, marvelling at the way the forest green coat – a gift he had commissioned to replace Bilbo's threadbare blue robe – had fitted his Hobbit like a glove. He paused briefly to stare at the way the sun's morning rays reflected off the different shades of brown, gold and red from the strands of Bilbo's soft hair, and he stared, mesmerized, at the small tufts that curled around the delicately pointed tip of his ears. It was funny how on Bilbo, Thorin did not find those offensive, even if they looked distinctively Elvish.

Bilbo's wild flailing caught his attention and Thorin reached over just in time to steady Bilbo before he could overbalance himself on his raised pedestal. Bilbo turned around and flashed him a quick, grateful smile. He did not see the beginning of a blush that bloomed across Thorin's cheeks.

Goodness, Thorin was stupidly, *disgustingly* besotted and what a world shattering experience *that* had been when he had finally realized the depths of his feelings for Bilbo. What was even worse was that after he came to accept this as a fact, he could not act on it; he was left to pathetically wax poetic in his head and from a distance like an infatuated teenager. Surely, if his father (and more terrifyingly, Dís) were to see this pathetic display of inaction and lack of boldness, the two would be most disappointed.

Dís would probably threaten him with violence.

Thorin bit back a growl even though his brows were already creased heavily into his characteristic, dark scowl. It's not as if he wanted to be stuck doing nothing! That moment of almost intimacy in the tent with Bilbo had caught him utterly by surprise and in his shock, he had behaved like he always had – he had automatically retreated behind a façade of cool indifference coupled with the familiar excuse of paperwork. It was an unfortunate habit that he had adopted in his days in court against backstabbing advisors and it had served him well ever since.

Until Bilbo Baggins was involved, of course.

Because if there were things that Bilbo Baggins was good at, they were defying all of Thorin's expectations and utterly disrupting Thorin's neatly ordered world.

Regardless, Thorin had acted automatically in defence and when he had finally sorted himself out enough to talk to Bilbo during lunch the next day, the Hobbit had all but fled from his presence before he could even open his mouth.

The sharp ache of disappointment had settled heavily in his gut. Perhaps he was reading this situation completely wrong after all. Maybe Bilbo was not at all interested and the Hobbit was trying to spare his feelings in his perplexingly subtle, non-aggressive, and entirely *Hobbitish* way of his. It could also be that Bilbo was not yet comfortable with the idea of going beyond the boundaries of friendship with Thorin.

Either way, Thorin had decided to give Bilbo some space. He refused to push his affection on the Hobbit and risk losing the close friendship that he had cultivated with Bilbo. The next day, he forced himself to behave normally around his friend and he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the Hobbit slowly lose his nervous skittishness around him.

It had occurred to Thorin (much, much later) what he had done: he had *voluntarily* placed himself in a position where he would do nothing until he could better read his friend's feelings and approach him without scaring him off. Mahal knows how long that could take, what with Thorin's admittedly terrible skill at empathy and Bilbo's irrational fear of anything that could disrupt the peace and calm in his life. There was also the fun fact that Thorin has as much patience as

Fíli and Kíli with common sense, or Dís with care and compassion for that matter. Suddenly, Thorin's noble goal to wait until it was the "right" time to approach Bilbo seemed like it was destined for failure from the get go. Worse still, Thorin could not come up with an alternative solution.

Thorin almost wished he had an army of Orcs and Goblins to slay to quell his mounting frustration. If anything, it was a much more acceptable outlet than hitting his head repeatedly against a wall.

"We'll be splitting into five groups today," Bilbo called out, still looking entirely too giddy for anyone awake at this Mahal forsaken hour of the day. Thorin shook himself out of his stupor and discretely straightened his spine from the half slouch he was in. From the corner of his eyes, he could see Dwalin nudge Glóin awake with his elbow none too gently. "If you can please follow Mister Haldan, he will direct you to the fields that we will be tending."

At the sound of his name, Bard's nervous-looking advisor snapped to attention from his doze in a mess of flailing limbs. He combed his fingers haphazardly through his mop of disarrayed, brown hair and straightened his clothes in a sad attempt to look alert.

"Uhm, yes. If you would all just follow me, please?" he squeaked out at the unimpressed crowd before spinning around on his heel to tromp off to the right. Thorin watched the man almost tripping over his own feet in his haste, twice. Glóin coughed unsubtly into his fist, his shoulders shaking in silent mirth.

"I hope that went alright," Bilbo said quietly and a bit uneasily to Thorin. He tilted his head and gave the Dwarf a small, sheepish grin. "I know that most people don't find farming very exciting but I hope I haven't bored anyone else to tears with my rambling." He jerked his head towards Haldan's retreating back. The Dwarves were shuffling slowly to follow the advisor and Thorin waved at Dwalin and Glóin to join the crowd.

"No, not at all," Thorin replied once he made sure that his friends had things under control. "You were very…"

Very what exactly? Thorin thought, scrambling his brains to finish the sentence. *Very passionate in the way you've spent the last fifteen minutes explaining something that went completely over my head but I did not mind watching your lips move? Very adorable in that coat I have given you? Very admirably stubborn in the way you had insisted on standing on top of that upturned apple crate so that everyone can see you when you addressed the crowd?*

"Informative," Thorin concluded instead. "Some people just don't do well in the mornings." And just for good measure, he smiled disarmingly at a relieved looking Bilbo.

The moment that the Hobbit turned his head away, Thorin threw a poisonous glare at the Man's back for making Bilbo feel bad.

"If you say so," Bilbo hummed, satisfied with the explanation. "Now, if I can just get off of this blasted thing."

"Would you like some help to get off the box, Master Hobbit?" Thorin asked teasingly after watching Bilbo struggle for a few seconds.

Bilbo glared half-heartedly at the bemused Dwarf. "No, Master Dwarf," he sniffed, "I've got this. Do feel free to continue to – eek!"

Without warning, Thorin had wrapped his arms around Bilbo's waist and easily lifted him off of the box, all the while ignoring the surprised squeaks of protests from the indignant Hobbit.

"Stop squirming so much, I am trying to help!"

"I just said that I had this under control! Now unhand me!"

Thorin rolled his eyes and tightened his hold around Bilbo, eliciting another pathetic little squeak from his friend. He ignored the Hobbit's familiar scent of earth and grass that tickled his nose and his pleasant warm weight in his arms. "That may be the case, but I would rather expedite this process so that we can catch up with Mister Haldan. Besides," he added with a grimace, "I do not trust him alone with the Dwarves."

Bilbo huffed after Thorin had finally deigned to release him on solid ground. "I doubt Mister Haldan can do much damage against the Dwarves, Thorin."

Thorin snorted. "It's not the Dwarves I'm worried for," he said wryly. He turned to follow the retreating Dwarven crowd, speaking loud enough for Bilbo to catch his words clearly, "Judging from Mister Haldan's natural predisposition to anxiety, I would rather avoid having to explain to Bard why his advisor had to be carried back to his house in a dead faint, one that was caused by the stress from being around rowdy Dwarves."

"He does seem like the overly nervous sort, doesn't he?" Bilbo chuckled and he jogged a few steps until he was beside Thorin again. "I thought the idea of having an advisor was to have someone around with a cool head."

"Of course not," Thorin huffed dismissively and Bilbo rolled his eyes lightly at the Dwarf's haughty tone. "A great advisor is someone who can be convinced to do your paperwork for you. Bard probably chose him for that very reason."

"Oh?" Bilbo quirked an eyebrow at Thorin, "And that must mean I make the most brilliant advisor, seeing that I *volunteered* to help you with your work."

"Well, I don't know about that," Thorin quipped back, the corners of his lips curled into a small smile. "A great advisor will do your paperwork for you, but I never said a *smart* one will. And since you just boasted about your

willingness for that task, I wonder which category you fit in –"

Thorin twisted away just in time to avoid Bilbo's swat to the arm. He did not bother to hide the large, unrepentant grin on his face that was brought on by the Hobbit's cry of mock outrage.

"Thorin Oakenshield! I dare you to come a little closer and repeat what you just said!"

"I do not understand why you are offended, Master Hobbit," the innocence in Thorin's voice was ruined by the way he was taking the pre-emptive measure to keep away from striking range. "I have paid you a compliment by saying that you made a *great* advisor." Just to add insult to injury, he shook his head and tsked in admonishment, "Some people are never happy with anything."

"I'll show you unhappy!" Bilbo cried out and proceeded to give chase to a laughing Thorin.

That morning, the Dwarven camp was treated to the rare sight of their great king running from his tiny Hobbit advisor across the golden grass fields of the valley, laughing boisterously along the way. If the villagers of Dale noticed that the Dwarves had arrived to their destination late but noticeably happier, they did not comment on it.

From Erebor, 2942.

To my dear sister Dís,

I have included a revised list of the supplies that we will need in addition to the items you have promised to provide for my camp. Please arrange for their delivery as soon as you are able.

I am pleased to hear of your progress in the Blue Mountains. Indeed, it seems like you have everything well and truly under control. Although I cannot convince you to give up on your…business, dangerous and unsuitable as it is for someone of your royal standing, at least you have proven yourself successful with it. I suppose I can be…gracious about your decision to run the company so long as you are happy and you are using every opportunity to crush those tree-shagging Elven competitors of yours.

Show them how things are done by those from the line of Durin, sister.

On another note, we have started to work on the farms in Dale today. Bilbo has proven himself to be a most gracious and patient teacher despite the obvious lack of knowledge and experience among the Dwarves. However, his best efforts were in vain and I'm afraid that food growing was not a skill that Mahal has blessed us with. None of Bilbo's wisdom on soil testing, amendment and preparation seemed to stick with any of us. By the end of the day, he was resigned to the fact that the only thing us Dwarves were exceptionally good at was tilling – an activity that involved mindlessly striking the earth with metal tools. Bilbo was quick to assign other agricultural activities to the Men instead. It was a compromise that everyone could happily agree on.

Surprisingly, Dwalin was the most efficient worker today out of everyone in the farm. From the aggressive way he had immersed himself into his task, one would almost suspect that he was using this as an outlet to vent off his frustrations. I cannot begin to imagine what could be the cause for that. Perhaps Balin would know more about this.

Work has started off slowly, but I anticipate for it to go much quicker once everyone has gotten used to their tasks. Us Dwarves have always been quick to master everything (with the exception of long-distance running and long jump, but if Mahal had intended us to be good at those, he would have created us with longer legs). In addition, I trust Bilbo completely, and with the Hobbit at the helm leading us, I am certain that your cold-resistant barley, wheat and rye can be sowed as soon as possible. With a little luck, we might be able to complete this task without any messy brawls or drunken rabbles.

I know, I'm not overly optimistic about the latter either, but one can dream.

Unfortunately, dear sister, this is where I must end this letter. I can see Bilbo standing beside my desk, tapping his foot impatiently while giving me a dirty look. He has been nagging at me since this afternoon after he had found out that I have purposely stopped taking that vile medicinal tea that Óin had prescribed. In retrospect, I should have burned that satchel of tea rather than hide it behind that pile of boring accounting reports, but how was I to know that Bilbo would actually read those? Worse still, when I told him that he was being ridiculous, he went on another hour long rant about my inability to take care of my own health. This brings us to the present where he has literally just placed a fresh mug of that disgusting concoction on my desk, refusing to leave until he is certain that I have drank it all. Do you see the disrespect I put up with on a daily basis?

- Thorin

PS: The honey mead idea is fine.

To my dear brother Thorin (to whom I am playing Middle-Earth's smallest fiddle),

You mean to tell me that Master Baggins has taken the initiative to make sure that you are alive and kicking, even if it meant that he had to go fetch your hidden medicine, brew the tea himself, serve it to you on a silver platter, and watch you drink it? I am absolutely shocked and appalled at how he is mistreating you, brother. Please, do tell me more! What other abuses has the Hobbit been heaping on you? Has he draped you with an extra, fur-lined blanket whenever he sees you shivering? Or has he chastised you politely to go get some sleep whenever he sees you nodding off at your desk?

I cannot even begin to imagine the abuse that you must be going through, Thorin. You have my utmost and deepest sympathy. I will have to send a letter to Balin and inform him of this grave situation at once so that he may put a stop to this brazen, little Hobbit!

I am happy that the farms are doing well thus far, and likewise, I will continue to hope that your good fortune will not run out any time soon. Let us be perfectly honest – you'd be lucky if this whole mission ends with less than ten drunken rabbles and/or brawls. I think it would be much more logical for you to plan the proper apology speeches to Bard so that he will not kick you Dwarves off of his lands after the inevitable debacle. I have included a few bottles of my award winning triple distilled spirits to the package that I will be sending you. Feel free to offer those as gifts to soothe over ruffled feathers or to drown your own sorrows in them. Either way, you will probably need them.

You're welcome.

I would also like to remind you that you need Master Baggins' help in order for the farms to succeed. Do try to be less of an ass to him. It would not be beneficial to anyone if he decided to up and quit on you all of a sudden. If that were the case, where would that leave you?

Your most gracious sister,

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

PS: I am extremely curious over your change of heart over my business endeavour but I must confess that I am also incredibly pleased by your decision. I am definitely keeping tabs on my Elven competitors and like you said, I have no intention of letting them win against my company. I did, however, notice that they have recently implemented a new strategy to improve sales of their product through the creative use of their wine bottle labels. They have designed the most beautiful art for them, which served to attract potential clients. Likewise, I have spoken to my fellow Dwarves from the company and have decided to design our own label for our new line of honey mead so that our product would stand out. Teleporno has the most brilliant idea over the image that we should use.

To my two lovely sons,

I have just received a letter from your Uncle. Not only has he given me his blessing to run my company, he spent a good half of that letter talking about his Hobbit. What in the blazes is going on in Erebor and what has happened to Thorin (or more specifically, between him and Master Baggins) to put him in such a good mood? I know your Uncle has started work at the farm. I want you both to refocus your spy efforts there.

Now that *that* matter has been established, how are you both doing? I trust that your injuries have been healed by now. How goes Phase Two of your mission? I would like to know all the gritty details you lot have put in place. I expect great things from Master Nori and yourselves. He's a crafty Dwarf that one; I'm glad that we've got him on our side.

The Blue Mountains are as secured as always if not a little dull, but what else is new? I have been focusing a lot of my attention on my business as usual and have decided to push forward a new line of honey mead. In addition, I am having my workers spend more time on the design of our product label in response to the new tactics employed by my Elven competitors. They have done a complete redesign of their wine bottle labels to attract new buyers and true to their Elvish nature, they came up with something entirely pretentious, utterly boring and nature-themed. They have created what look like pieces of delicate art work.

It pains me to admit this but the buyers love the new design.

I refuse to go down that route and after speaking at great lengths with Teleporno (who also happens to have a great eye for design, I am pleased to say), we came up with something that we both agree would serve our purposes well. I have attached a copy of the new label to our honey mead product for your perusal. Please let me know what you think.

With all the love in the world,

Your most gracious mother

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

Dear Mother,

You're right in assuming that Kíli and I are pretty much recovered *(hello Mum! I've been making sure that I was back in tip top shape with my archery, although I will miss being known around the camp as that Dwarf who could shoot a fantastic shot one-handed)*. Just because your arm is healed doesn't mean you can't continue to shoot your cross-bow one-handed, you doofus.

(That's…very true! Wait, I have a great idea! What if I double wield a pair of crossbows instead of just firing one? Not only will my level of awesome double, but my ability to lay waste to my enemies will as well! It's a win-win situation! What can possibly go wrong?)

Can you imagine us on the battle field? I will hack away at anyone within range with my double swords while you pick off those who think they could run away with your two cross-bows.

(Clearly, we are Orc killing geniuses.) Don't worry Mum, I'll keep an eye on him again!

Regarding your question about why Uncle has been in such a great mood, we've spoken with Dwalin and according to him, Uncle and Bilbo "spent the entire bloody day making eyes at each other and flirting, never mind that hardworking Dwarves like himself had to pick up the slack." There was also something about "chasing each other around in the meadows," which I'm not sure if that is a euphemism for something decidedly less innocent, but before I could probe any further, Dwalin had stalked off all angry like. *(Dwalin had been extremely agitated as of late. It probably has to do with the way Dori had been keeping himself glued to Ori's side.)* Poor, poor Dwalin. Clearly, he's going through Ori-withdrawal symptoms. For the sake of everyone's safety in the camp, I hope he'll get his much needed alone time with Ori soon.

Glóin was decidedly unhelpful as well. All he did was chuckle while rubbing his palms together, muttering, "I'm going to be rich!" Whatever happened in the farm had caused a sharp increase in the participants in the betting pool.

Phase Two is coming along swimmingly. We have included to this letter a copy of the pamphlet currently in circulation at the moment so that you may have a better idea on the story we've worked on. With the success of our first pamphlet, the Dwarves were very eager to get their hands on some fresh reading material. It also helps that this story is a direct sequel to the one from Phase One. *(Already, we've had to republish a few more dozens of the pamphlets twice and that's in addition to the original hundred we released! Who knew that the Dwarves would like romance so much?)* There were also some commission requests that were made towards our artist but Ori refused them. Too bad, I heard that the Dwarves were ready to pay quite the pretty penny for his drawings as well. *(Can you imagine anyone willing to pay three silver pieces for a sketch of Uncle and Bilbo staring soulfully into each other's eyes? Three silver pieces! What is this madness? I don't think I will ever understand! Also, I don't understand why there has been an increase in demand for this current set of pamphlets. We've made around the same number as the ones from Phase One…)*

I heard from Bofur and Bombur that our pamphlets have gotten so popular, Dwarves are guarding their copies rather jealously whenever they manage to get their hands on them. Everyone wants their own copy now! We've even had requests to republish the pamphlet from Phase One just so that the Dwarves could have a "complete collection".

I think we're going to release twelve more of those pamphlets before moving to Phase Three. If you remember, Mother, this phase is the one where we can get really creative with the story telling. In Nori's words, this is the phase where we have to "sell it to the Dwarves that Master Baggins and His Majesty will work not only in the present, but in the future as well!" In Phase Three, we're no longer constrained by the past and present events so we can really exercise our imagination and our story telling skills there.

(In other words, Master Nori is actively encouraging us to make things up. Everything goes with the exception of smut. He's pretty strict about the no smut rule. Bifur continues to be incredibly displeased by this decision and he's been caught trying to slip some…racier material in the pamphlets.)

I remembered that you were interested in participating for this phase. Have you brainstormed any ideas for the stories you would like to write?

Forever your loving sons,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 14 Mar., 2942.

PS: We forgot to address this in the letter so we'll mention it here – Kíli and I had a look at that honey mead label of yours and to be frank, we're a bit…speechless.

(Why…is there a picture of Uncle on the label?Also, why is his shirt half- opened? I mean, I can understand why he would keep the bottle in his hand raised triumphantly to the air and I can see that having his leg propped up on a wooden barrel lends him a more confident, roguish feel, but what purpose does revealing his chest serve?)

At least Uncle's level of majesticness was well portrayed from his windswept hair. However, I fail to see how this label was designed to combat your Elven competitors' artistic creation…

Have you told Uncle about this?! I feel uneasy possessing a copy of this label!

PPS: I don't think you should trust the words of a Dwarf who calls himself Teleporno.

To my two sons who should know better than to ask questions whose answers they do not wish to hear,

The Elves created this delicate but largely impersonal piece of art for their labels that not only sapped out every drop of fun from their product, they've essentially sent out this message that their wine is only for classy, high-end clientele.

Teleporno and I decided to say, "To Hell with that!" Durin's Liquid Courage Brewery does not discriminate and we welcome everyone from all walks of life into our folds! That is why for our label, we decided to do something that's the complete polar opposite – the Elves created something highbrow to celebrate nature, we're creating something low brow that celebrates people.

And if that means we have to do this with partial nudity viaexposed chests, then so be it!

Also, nothing screams 'fun' more than a courageous, majestic Dwarven king happily revelling in the drunken debauchery of an evening that would make lesser men weep!

So you see, that image of your Uncle represents much more than just a label for our honey mead. When you gaze upon it, you will remember all the good times you have shared with your loved ones in celebrating life! It is a metaphor that having fun ultimately transcends all people, no matter their stature! At the same time, through our mascot, it flaunts the noble qualities that our consumers would want: courage, strength, and confidence (all the while looking ruggedly handsome). That label is much more that what you see, it is the ultimate symbol for freedom!

With that said, please do not show this label to your Uncle. Let me handle him.

Regarding the pamphlet that you have sent me, please pass on my compliments to the company members for their job well done. I can see why the Dwarves would want to become emotionally invested in your stories. People like to see love blossoming between two characters that had to jump over all the hurdles that life can possibly throw at them. It gives them hope to know that despite all the odds, goodness and love can be triumphant.

Master Ori's beautifully done images definitely add a new depth of emotions to the stories. I can understand why his art is so popular and it's a shame he's much too noble to accept payment for his work. I, myself, am half tempted to pay him a pretty sum of money for a commission!

Fíli, you remembered correctly; I had expressed my interest in contributing my writing for Phase Three. I am currently juggling with a couple of ideas but I haven't had the chance to work too deeply with them at the moment. Please let me know when Nori is accepting the drafts, I can probably whip something up for him in a week or so.

On that note, I shall end this letter with a reminder to the both of you to stay safe. Kíli: that double wielding crossbow idea is a horrible one and you would sooner end up with an arrow in the eye than having the chance to slay anything. Fíli: stop encouraging him! If the two of you are that bored, feel free to think of new and creative ways to get more information on what's going on in the farms! I do not like to operate blind and I would rather get my reports from the both of you than from another source. Try not to antagonize your Uncle and for the love of Mahal, keep that label hidden from him!

I have given you your next mission so to my two wayward sons, I say to you, "Carry on." There will be peace when you are done. Peace from my nagging that is.

With love as always,

Your honourable mother

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

"Master Bilbo Baggins! There you are!"

Bilbo looked up in surprise as Dáin trudged determinately through the meadow towards him with his two advisors flanking him protectively on each side. The Dwarven Lord's jovial tone rang abrasively loud across the field and to Bilbo's dismay, rows of heads, Dwarves and Men alike, were raised from their work to peer curiously at the proceeding.

"I have been looking for you!" Dáin repeated again, still sporting his usual grin. Bilbo can never understand how the Dwarf can be so cheery and energetic, not when his advisors constantly look like the world had pissed into their ale.

"And you have found me, Master Dáin. Is there anything I can help you with?" Bilbo plastered on a tentative smile. He nodded at the Iron Hills advisors and greeted politely, "Master Borin, Master Frór."

"No, no, I don't need help!" Dáin wrinkled his nose and waved his hand to dismiss the thought at the same time that his advisors gave a small, but very grudging, nod of acknowledgement. "I'm here to congratulate you, of course!"

Then, the Dwarven Lord boldly reached over, clasped Bilbo's hand in both of his, and began shaking it enthusiastically.

Bilbo's eyes widened. "I – just, wait a minute! Hold on, now! Congratulate me on what exactly?"

"Why, on being the Fulla to his Majesty's Buri!" Dáin exclaimed. "Although come to think of it, given the King's solemn disposition, I would say it's more like the other way around. He's the one who's more like Fulla so it should be you

who plays Buri. Yes, that's got to be it." Dáin nodded resolutely to himself as if the insanity he was spouting made a lick of sense.

Bilbo yanked his hand away with a wince. Eru, his shoulder will *ache* by the end of the day from that vigorous handshake. "I'm sorry, but I haven't the slightest clue to what you just said," he replied exasperatedly. He gave a cursory glance around the fields at the eavesdropping Dwarves to see if there was anyone who could help him, but the Dwarves had all immediately ducked their heads low. Likewise, all the Men had quickly averted their eyes although their collective smirks were still painfully evident on their faces.

Unhelpful sods, the lot of them, Bilbo thought. And just for good measure, he cast a baleful glare at the crowd.

"Ah, no matter!" Dáin continued uncaringly but just as happily. He was determined to carry on the conversation with or without Bilbo's input or understanding. "Either way, I have never seen the King look happier, not to mention, whole and hale! Whatever miracle you have performed – and it certainly looks like one, don't you deny it – you have done him a great service, one worthy of thanks!"

"Uhm, you're welcome?" Bilbo said in hesitation. Was that what Dáin was seeking him out for? To say thanks on behalf of Thorin for all the help he has offered the king? "It's really no trouble at all. It's the very least I could do," he finished lamely.

Now it was Dáin's turn to stare incredulously back at Bilbo. His grin was frozen on his face. "No trouble at all? The least you could do?" the Dwarf repeated haltingly, as if he could not believe what he had just heard.

The two spent a few seconds awkwardly staring at each other in silence and a sinking feeling of dread slowly bubbled up in Bilbo. *Well done, now you've gone and said something insulting,* the voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Lobelia Sackville-Baggins shrilled. *Fix this right this instance!*

Bilbo swallowed heavily to wet his suddenly dry mouth. Cold sweat was starting to break out on his forehead. "Ah, yes. You see, what I meant –"

A sharp, keening wail, one that Bilbo belatedly realized came from *Dáin* of all people, neatly interrupted the Hobbit, and the next thing he knew, he was swept into a massive, crushing *bear hug*.

"Oh, you sweet, blessed, kind-hearted, humble little Hobbit! Oh, come here, you magnificent creature!"

"Master Dáin, please! Not so hard –"

"Never would I have ever predicted to see this happy, happy day!"

"I'm glad that you're happy, but if you could just release –"

"And to think, I have almost given up on my dear cousin! Clearly, I was wrong! Oh, my cousin is a lucky one to have found you!"

The Dwarf's speech devolved into a blubbering mess of Khuzdûl. Not that Bilbo would have noticed, of course. He was struggling to breathe.

"Master Dáin, please!" Bilbo gasped out, trying to pry himself out of the Dwarf's suffocating hold but to no success. He sent a pleading look to the stoic Dwarven advisors and desperately mouthed out, 'help'.

Borin rolled his eyes and snorted but Frór, and *Eru* bless that tall, sour-faced Dwarf, took a half-step forward. His posture was as ramrod straight as ever and his hand was kept firmly clasped behind his back. "My Lord," he interjected smoothly in his nasally voice, "please allow Master Baggins some room to breathe."

"Oh, oh, I'm sorry!" Dáin reluctantly released Bilbo and the Hobbit promptly doubled over gasping. "I'm just so *happy*!" He spun around at looked at his silent advisors with arched brows, "Well? Aren't you two happy as well? Don't just stand there, say something!"

"We're ecstatic," Borin spat out bitterly. His face was twisted in a grimace of disgust that effectively robbed any of the good cheer from the conversation. "It warms my heart to see that our King has chosen this peace-loving, food-growing Hobbit over one of his own people!"

Shocked into silence, everyone could only gape at the Dwarf.

Dáin's face instantly darkened and Bilbo was taken aback by the difference from his earlier, and much happier, expression. "Borin," he warned lowly. His tone held the promise of danger if his advisor refused to apologize immediately. Borin, however, only squared his shoulders stubbornly and stuck out his chin further in defiance.

"What Borin is saying is that there *might* be some concerns over the King's decision," Frór hastily and nervously piped in. His cool façade and his stringent hold on formalities were broken in the tense standoff between his friend and his Lord. "*Some* might believe that the King should have chosen a Dwarf since only a Dwarf can have a true understanding of Erebor's needs."

"Wait a minute," Bilbo cut in, offended, insulted *and* confused, "chosen for what exactly? As Thorin's advisor? As his *friend*?"

"Ignore him, Master Baggins," the Iron Hills Lord said pleasantly, but he did not lessen his hard gaze from his two advisors. "After all, they are certainly not insolent enough to imply that they are in any position to judge the decisions of

the King, especially not against someone whom the King holds in high esteem."

Borin's eyes grew furious and his lips pulled back into a snarl, "No, my Lord, I am not in any position to judge! I only wish that I will never see the day that Erebor is yet again brought to ruin from the machinations of an outsider! Now if you will excuse me," the Dwarf gave a stiff bow and before he could be dismissed, he spun briskly on his heels and marched away. The Dwarven workers and the Men that were in his way silently parted for the angry advisor to pass through.

Frór cleared his throat and muttered urgently, "My Lord, please allow me to speak to him." At his Lord's stony nod, he bowed low – once to his Lord and once to Bilbo – and followed hurriedly after Borin.

The silence that settled over Bilbo and Dáin was palpable with tension. Flushed with embarrassment, Bilbo shifted uncomfortably in place and tried his damndest to stare at anything that was not Dáin or his retreating advisors. He couldn't stop replaying the stinging words that Borin had left behind. Were there any truths to the things that the Dwarf had said? Did the Dwarves think less of Thorin because he chose Bilbo as his advisor? If he had known that his involvement would have invited more trouble to the Dwarven King, he would not have accepted this position and instead, he would've found a different way to provide aid.

Bilbo frowned and kicked aimlessly at a loose stone on the ground. At the end of the day, all he had wanted to do was to *help* Thorin. It seemed like he couldn't even do that properly.

Dáin must have guessed the thoughts that were going around in Bilbo's head since the look he gave to Bilbo was full of understanding and sadness. "I apologize, Master Baggins," he began softly. "Those words were uncalled for and they were spoken out of anger that should not be directed at you. Borin had lost his entire family to Smaug. The years have not dulled his grief." He shook his head wearily and sighed, "Please pay him no mind. You are well respected within the camp. I can most certainly vouch for that." Dáin gave Bilbo a wan smile and clapped on his shoulder lightly.

Bilbo smiled hesitantly back at the Dwarf. His spirit was only slightly lifted by the explanation but regardless, the Dwarven Lord had apologized on behalf of his advisor and Bilbo was gracious enough to accept that. "Thank you, Master Dáin. I'm sorry to hear what had happened to Master Borin. I can only wish that he could find some peace."

"I hope so too, Master Baggins," Dáin murmured. He turned to look wistfully at the direction that his advisors had left in. His eyes roamed lazily across the span of the valley, casually observing the blades of wild, yellowed grass that were swaying in the wind. After a few seconds, he shook himself out of his stupor and grinned apologetically back at Bilbo. "Well then, I'm afraid I have monopolized enough of your time already. I'd best be off! If you need help in any way or if you have any problems at all, please do let me know."

With a short nod to Bilbo and one last clap to the shoulder, Dáin casually walked away, whistling a soft tune.

Bilbo managed to keep his shoulders from dropping until Dáin appeared nothing but a blurry speck out in the horizon; the moment he was firmly out of sight, the Hobbit sighed and pressed his palms against his eyes. Bilbo had always hated conflicts. Even the petty squabbles he had experienced back in the Shire would inevitably leave him drained and crabby. This one was no different. Bilbo's enthusiasm from this morning had thoroughly vanished, leaving behind a sense of heaviness from the many negative thoughts that were circling in his mind. Sure, Borin had spoken in anger but he wasn't wrong per se. What did Bilbo know about Erebor and its Dwarves? He didn't even know about the Dwarves' disgust of agricultural tasks until recently and when he had found out, he *still* somehow managed to convince Thorin into getting the Dwarves to farm.

Maybe it's best if he gave up his post as an advisor.

Bilbo whipped his head up abruptly at the sound of approaching footsteps, jarring him out of his thoughts. "Master Haldan," he greeted tiredly after registering his new visitor, "to what can I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"M-master Baggins," the advisor stuttered, nervously wringing his hands. He licked his lips, opened and closed his mouth a few times before spewing out disjointedly, "I just. Those were some nasty words. What that Dwarf said, that is. And, well, I-I may have heard them. All of them." He winced at his blunt delivery.

Bilbo chuckled humourlessly, "Yes. It seems like you and everyone around here has heard them, I'm certain." The Hobbit took a quick scan of the area and saw all the workers simultaneously bent down to avoid his eyes.

"No, that's not what I meant –" Haldan stopped himself and ran his hand through his hair in frustration. It was a nervous habit that Bilbo had observed in the advisor, often followed by a stream of incessant stammering, so he was surprised when Haldan exclaimed passionately, "What I meant is that Master Borin has no right to say anything like that to you!"

Emboldened by Bilbo's shocked silence, Haldan ploughed on, "Look, I know how it feels like to be scrutinized constantly. I know what people say about me and I can't blame them either. I don't exactly consider *myself* to be proper advisor material either, so I can understand when people doubt…me." He gestured to himself and his lips twisted into a small mocking smile.

"I know how it feels like when everyone thinks you don't measure up. But the thing is, Master Baggins, you're not me. *You're* actually doing a damn good job providing help to your people! And clearly, King Thorin must believe so as

well or else he wouldn't have given you that post, so don't let those Iron Hills advisors get to you. They really have no basis to question why you were chosen!"

"Even if Thorin thinks I'm doing an adequate job," Bilbo replied quietly, "is keeping me worth all the trouble and backlash?"

Haldan crossed his arms over his chest and hummed thoughtfully, "With all due respect, Master Baggins, I think you need to trust the King's good judgement more. Surely, he would know about the threat of backlash beforehand and how severely this could hurt him. In spite of this, he hasn't kicked you out of your position and he continues to seek advice from you." Haldan shrugged and added, "I think that speaks for itself."

Bilbo had to admit that Master Haldan's words do have a ring of truth to them. Thorin is a Dwarf who is intensely loyal and protective of his people, not to mention, he is an experienced ruler. If Bilbo's presence is more troublesome than it's worth, he would not have compromised the safety of his people or the security of his rule by doing nothing. Surely, he would have *said* something by now, and if not him, then Balin or Dwalin.

Bilbo furrowed his brows and pressed his lips into a thin line. Like Master Haldan had said, he'll just have to have faith in his friends and stand firm behind Thorin's decision, even if he continues to doubt himself. If the Iron Hills advisors have an issue with him being chosen as Thorin's trusted advisor, then they can personally take this up with the King.

"Thank you Master Haldan for your kind words," Bilbo found himself smiling warmly at his unexpected ally. The tightness around his chest loosened enough for him to breathe easily again. "By the way, I think you're greatly underestimating yourself. You certainly offered a lot of great advice just now." And because what Haldan had said applied to himself as well, Bilbo parroted playfully, "Surely, the fact that King Bard continues to have you in his service speaks for itself too."

Bilbo could not help but feel pleased at the blossoming smile on Haldan's face. This could very well be the start of a beautiful friendship.

Fíli and Kíli's Super Secret Awesome Spy Report (Farm Edition!) #1

Targets: Bilbo and Uncle for now, unless we get distracted or we inadvertently find ourselves tangled in someone else's awkward courtship dance. In all honesty, I don't think we can find one as awkward as Bilbo and Uncle's though. Even Dwalin and Ori's went faster than theirs, and they had Nori and Dori constantly breathing down their backs! *(I honestly do not understand what's taking Bilbo and Uncle so long. Why are they stupidly tip toeing around each other like that? Just snog already!)*

Goal: To watch the slow, painful progress of Bilbo's and Uncle's relationship. At this point, I'm extremely tempted to interfere because this looks like it could go on for another decade with zero progress. I'd like to see them at least hold hands some time in this century, you know! *(Although I can't agree with you more, it's better if we leave them alone. For one, we made a promise to never interfere when we first started our Project. It would ruin the betting pool and Glóin would murder us in cold blood, Durin's heirs be damned!)*

Glóin is a big enough ass to do it too! I can't believe he's married and to someone as gorgeous as his wife! Why is it that the mean sods get all the women?

Note: Ask Mother why the mean sods get all the women.

Impact of mission if successful:

1. Mother will have her curiosity satiated and hopefully, she will be too distracted to nag at us for carrying out our plan to teach Kíli how to double wield those crossbows. We're not giving that dream up, Mother!

2. We will have more to report to the next meeting, which will fuel the gossip mill. Also, we hope to draw inspiration from these real life events so that we can craft our beautiful works of fiction!

3. It will keep us busy and out of sight, which will minimize our chance into running into Uncle and subsequently being dragged to do: a) more farm work, b) more paperwork, and c) more horrible sword play sessions. *(We haven't recovered from that last traumatic one with Uncle. Although he's in a considerably better mood this time around, we have to face a very angry and frustrated Dwalin instead. I don't know what's better, having an enraged Uncle Thorin or an enraged Dwalin charge at us.)*

I would take an angry Uncle any day. At least he couldn't round house kick a cow to the point where cheese will come squirting out of its udders.

(Ew, Fíli. Why must you bring that up again?! Mahal!)

Oh, you love the mental picture. Don't lie.

Day 1

Note: Day 1 corresponds to the day that Kíli and I are present on the farm. It should be noted that Uncle and Bilbo have been working in the fields for a week already.

Duration: The whole day! And what a long but fruitful investigation this has been! *(Most. Interesting. Day. Ever.)*

Summary of events:

We arrived to the farms before sunrise with our breakfast half-finished and stashed in a bag. *(We were late this morning and we only had time to finish ourloaf of bread, five links of sausages, half a block of cheese, four fried eggs, three strips of bacon and three mugs of ale. We didn't even have the time to snag extra servings of the meat pie or mashed potatoes! How do they expect us to work on an empty stomach?)*

Once we had arrived, we spent an hour staring groggily at Bilbo, who was energetically describing to us our daily tasks. Judging from the presence of the makeshift wooden platform and how Bilbo had immediately beelined for it before starting his talk, I assume that Bilbo does this speech giving business a lot. Meanwhile, Kíli kept falling asleep and I had to constantly shake him awake. *(In my defence, Uncle himself looked like he was asleep. Mind you, he did it with his eyes open if that vacant, unseeing look on his face was anything to go by.)* Yes, but Uncle was not on the verge of snoring and he was most certainly not dribbling on my shoulder. Also, he was standing perfectly straight.

(I wonder how he does that. It will be a useful trick to learn!)

This was when we had noticed the first strange event of the day – Bilbo had just finished his speech and Uncle had turned to the Hobbit to start on a new conversation.

(Whatever their conversation was about, it must be something that frustrated the Hobbit. The way Bilbo had thrownup his hands as if he was saying, "Why Mahal? Why me?" was rather telling.)

Uncle, on the other hand, just rolled his eyes exasperatedly and, upon seeing that everyone around them had left already, nonchalantly *wrapped* his arms around Bilbo's waist and lifted him clear off the platform. And Bilbo just…carried on talking without missing a beat!

There was no blink of surprise, no stuttered speech, no struggle or loudly made complaints. Bilbo and Uncle's conversation was uninterrupted even after Uncle had deposited him to the ground and had reached over to straighten the Hobbit's dishevelled clothing. They were acting as if all this was a daily occurrence!

(It's as if Bilbo was going, "Oh, what do you mean I have a majestic Dwarf lifting me up in the air like I was a heroine from those romance novels that Kíli most definitely does not read in secrecy? And what do you mean that this same majestic Dwarf is being extremely hands on with fussing over my clothing? Pish posh! Nothing to see here!")

And Uncle just hummed along passively and occasionally threw in some uselessly placating sayings like, "there, there", "if that's what you think", "I'm sure," and "is that so?" when to anyone else, he would've given them the Durin's Glare of Death. It was an eerie sight.

We followed the two discreetly to the work site and were careful to select a work area that would give us the best vantage point. *(Not like they would have noticed if we weren't being discreet, of course. They were completely oblivious to their surroundings. Speaking of which Fíli, did you notice how all the Dwarves and Men were staring at the two as well?)* I did, Kíli! It's good to experience firsthand the fruits of our labour!

We spent the morning tilling, which by the way, has got to be one of the most boring tasks ever to be invented. I think the only activity that could be even more boring is *reading* about tilling. *(Or watching the ponies.)* Or watching the paint dry. *(Watching the grass grow.)* Listening to Dori go on about how certain types of wine has a fruity bouquet, whatever that even means. *(Sitting around completely quiet while watching Ori knit.)* That's not that bad! If you stare at him all intense like, he'll become flustered and you can get all kinds of interesting responses from him. *(Huh. You do have a point. Also, why do you sound like you've done this before?)*

Never you mind!

Anyway, while we tilled, we were able to quietly observe Uncle and Bilbo some more. The rest of the day's odd events could be summarized by the following:

1. Uncle showering Bilbo with all these little, lingering touches *(and likewise, Bilbo to Uncle as well)*. By 'touches', we meant, and have seen them give each other –

a) A gentle brush along the back,

b) A firm hand on the shoulder, and

c) A gentle squeeze along the arms.

Finally, things escalated to the point where Uncle kept a firm grip on Bilbo's sides, which lead to the two of them leaning *very, very* close to each other, *(and the rest of the working Dwarves, leaning very, very close to watch)…*

…but absolutely nothing happened. The two jumped apart at the last minute and went back to work awkwardly in silence. The collective groan of disappointment that rang across the field could not have been more obvious.

2. The reciprocating soulful gazes that occurred after that disappointing incident. Bilbo would peer at Uncle from under his lashes and Uncle would occasionally sneak glances at Bilbo when the Hobbit was preoccupied. Dwalin was

completely right about those two, they make quite the pathetic sight. *(And you know you've hit a new low when Master Dwalin, the most awkward Dwarf in a relationship, thinks that you are being pathetic.)* It's the ultimate example of the pot calling the kettle black, which if you think about it, is quite funny in that sad sort of way.

3. Thankfully, the awkward silence was shattered by lunch time. Uncle and Bilbo walked off to find a quiet place to dine *(and since we're the most amazing nephews in the history of Middle-Earth, Fíli and I not only declined their offer to join them, we also set up a perimeter to ensure that no busy-body Dwarf or Men could interrupt them).* Mother would have been proud of our thoughtfulness!

4. After lunch, the two were in a much happier mood and they merrily went off to work some more. There was a lot of bantering going on between them and they would break into rounds of snickering *(like a pair of school children!)*

I never even knew Uncle could relax in public, let alone snicker. And of course, somewhere in between the jokes and the laughter, the casual touching came back.

The good news from all of this is that Uncle and Bilbo are getting along wonderfully, even though we have not yet found the proof to suggest that they have made proper use of their Love Shack. (*Ew, Fíli! Ew!)* But from the way that things are going, I'm guessing that we can rejoice soon! There is hope for us yet!

We shall continue to keep vigil in the farms!

- Fíli *(and Kíli!)*

It has been exactly one week since Thorin had promised himself not to push his affection on Bilbo and instead, to wait until the Hobbit was more comfortable around him before breeching the subject.

It had also been one of the worst weeks he had to endure since reclaiming Erebor. Ironically, it was because he and Bilbo have gotten along *swimmingly* in the fields.

"Thorin! We're going to get started on sowing the barley seeds. Do you want to come and help?"

Thorin paused and looked up, his hands keeping a loose grip on the long handle of his rake. His breath hitched a little at the sight that greeted him – Bilbo Baggins had sprinted over a short distance to deliver the news and the light exertion had caused the Hobbit's cheeks to flush attractively. The russet curls that usually fall over his forehead were darkened with perspiration and they lay plastered against his skin. Bilbo casually reached up to wipe the sweat off his face, inadvertently smearing a thin strip of dirt from his fingers in the process. Despite the obvious warmth that he was feeling, Bilbo was still stubbornly wearing his coat, although the sleeves had been neatly rolled up to prevent getting dirt on them.

Bilbo looked absolutely lovely. Thorin wished that he could turn his observations on the Hobbit off.

"I'm not sure how much help I will be able to provide," the Dwarf answered bashfully and he offered Bilbo an apologetic smile. "Also, you have a little dirt there," he pointed helpfully at Bilbo's forehead.

Bilbo looked up, cross-eyed. "Wait, where? Here?" he futilely swiped above his brow.

Thorin chuckled and he automatically reached over to brush away the dirt with his thumb, trailing his fingers lightly over the Hobbit's slightly damp and heated skin. "There, now you look slightly more presentable, Master Baggins."

Bilbo's eyes widened and for a second, Thorin could have sworn that he looked inexplicably pleased, but the Hobbit quickly looked away and the fleeting expression changed into that of embarrassment. "Ah, sorry. I must look a right mess."

You can be covered in mud while wearing a potato sack and I will still find you unbelievably attractive, was what Thorin wanted to say but instead, he settled with, "I was only joking, Bilbo. Although I must say, you're looking a bit warm in that coat."

"I was doing just fine before I ran here, but alright, I'll take this off if it makes you *feel* better." Bilbo rolled his eyes sarcastically and with great care, he undid the gold buttons and slowly worked his way out of his jacket. If Thorin happened to notice how Bilbo's wet, white shirt had turned *slightly* translucent and the way it clung attractively to the Hobbit's torso, well, he could hardly be blamed for making that observation.

He could not, however, find the proper excuse to justify how his eyes had zeroed in on the delicious patch of pale, soft skin that was peeking from beneath Bilbo's open collar.

Mahal have mercy on his soul.

"There, better?"

Thorin swallowed dryly but he managed to croak out, "Yes, much."

Bilbo turned around to shake out his jacket and Thorin refused to look at the way his pants stretched over his behind because damn it all, he has more self-respect than that and –

Oh bollocks, he looked.

"Well, now that we have this sorted out," Bilbo called out while his back was still turned, "what say you about coming?"

Thorin could feel the blood immediately rushing to his face and he choked uselessly on air. “B-begging your pardon?” he spluttered, his voice slightly rising.

Bilbo turned his head around to give the Dwarf a perplexed look. “Coming with me for the sowing process,” he said slowly while draping the aired-out jacket on his left arm. He frowned and stalked closer to Thorin, “Are you feeling alright? You look a bit flushed.” He did not look convinced at Thorin’s answering, mechanical nod.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just…too much time in the sun,” Thorin cleared his throat and desperately forced his mind out of the gutter. “Why don’t you go ahead first? I will join you shortly after finishing this up,” he gestured vaguely at the rake that he miraculously still had his grip on. Thankfully, Bilbo did not question his explanation any further and instead, left for his own field after accepting his words gracefully.

That was it, Thorin’s eyes trained on Bilbo’s retreating back as he thought in despair, *there cannot be any more of this*. He cannot withstand another week of this cruel and unusual torture, not with the way his control was being severely tested each and every day. He needed to find a solution fast before he snapped and end up doing something that he truly regret.

Maybe he should ask Dís for help…

And risk facing a lifetime of mockery? Never! Thorin ruthlessly squashed that string of thought before it could fully mature. He hasn’t sunk *that* low where he would resort to giving his younger sister ammunition against him. Besides, how would he be able to hold his head up high in the future knowing that he had to beg for outside help to secure his own consort?

No, this would have to be done solely by him through careful planning.

Thorin leaned his forehead against the upright handle of the rake and groaned in utmost misery. He had a feeling that he will be doing a lot of praying for strength to *any* deity who would listen to him.

Notes:

And this brings us closer and closer to the end of this fic! The next chapter will feature one last hurrah before the inevitable happy ending, because I am a sucker for happy endings. Who’s excited? I know I am!

Thank you for your lovely comments, kudos, recs, favs, and bookmarks! As always, I do read and reply to you reviews, unless you are on ffnet and you posted the comments anonymously. In that case, I can’t get back to you and I’m sorry for that.

Author’s Notes:

[1] Random extra information: I estimated the distance between Dale and Erebor to be around 10 miles (ie. 16 km) using this map (http://3rin.gs/#0.1540527,0.3100586,0.1544189,0.5658265,c,). After making the assumption that the speed of an average horse ride is around 16 – 27 km/h, my rough calculations showed that it takes under 1 hr to get to Dale one way, which makes commuting to and from Dale every day a possible journey.

[2] Dis’ honey mead label idea was inspired from a fanart (on Tumblr) of Thorin posing on a label as the honey mead mascot, although from what I remember, he was not posing with his chest exposed, haha! Unfortunately, I seem to have misplaced the link for that fanart! I shall love you if you can help me find it as well as the wonderful artist who created such a masterpiece.

[EDIT] FOUND IT! Thanks to Jonzz from ffnet and FlyingMonkey on AO3 for the find! The art is here: http://ramida-r.deviantart.com/art/Thorinmead-348665339.

[3] Who caught that brief, re-interpreted two-liner insert of the lyrics from that Kansas song? :D

[4] Further explanation regarding Dain: Essentially, he has gotten a hold of the pamphlets and in his happiness, he rushed over to offer his most heartfelt congratulations to Bilbo for securing Thorin’s affection. Likewise, Borin was peeved because of that issue. Bilbo (and Haldan), however, completely missed the point and wrongly assumed that they were talking about Thorin’s decision to choose him as an adviser. Unfortunately, they never had the chance to be corrected by Dain what with the sudden onset of drama, courtesy of Borin.

Chapter 9 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1651560)

Notes:

I know that I have some readers who like to read this before going to work, so I thought to let you know that this chapter is long (13k+ in word length). Please watch over yourselves so that you will not run out of time and/or be late. :D Thank you so much for all the support!

Beta-ed by the wonderful toraberushimeri, who consistently does an excellent job with making this train-wreck beauuuttiffullllll~

If you're interested, you can follow my tumblr. My username is bgtea

AND LOOK! FANARTS!! All my love to feignedsobriquet (on tumblr), who made this absolutely jaw-droppingly gorgeous fanart (of Nori from Chapter 5), (https://feignedsobriquet.tumblr.com/post/47628881544) and to elenorasweet, for her sweet and utterly perfect drawing of Bilbo and Thorin (spoilers for Chapter 9): (https://elenorasweet.tumblr.com/post/54292931274/so-there-was-an-update-of-the-inevitable-love)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_9_endnotes) .)

Part. XIII Bilbo and Thorin

Bofur entered Balin's brightly lit tent to the sight of what looked like a tense standoff between Dwalin and Dori, and he promptly fought the urge to turn right back around and leave. Some of the other Company members (read: Glóin, Óin and the princes) had already clustered themselves where the action was, while watching the spectacle with sharp, keen eyes. Bofur, in comparison, could only sigh and pinch the bridge of his nose in quiet exasperation.

I guess today is going to be one of those days, Bofur's resigned thoughts rang in his head. Just once, he would like to have a meeting with the Dwarves without having to tip-toe around the family drama surrounding Ori's choice of partner and Dori's intense disapproval of...pretty much Ori having a love life. Clearly, his wish for a fruitful, *peaceful* meeting where they could have deep discussions about their completely fictional interpretation of Thorin and Bilbo's relationship died a quick death, which was utterly ridiculous since the meeting hasn't even started yet and Bofur had arrived *early*.

And damn it all, he had been so looking forward to sharing his Bagginshield story to the rest of the group too!

Bofur quickly glanced around the room and he felt some of his tension leaving when he spotted his brother and cousin sitting huddled in a corner, both sporting identical grim expressions that could give Bard's a run for his money. At least his family had arrived and he has people with which he could wallow in misery.

"So, what's going on *this* time?" Bofur muttered after quietly navigating to the two Dwarves. He shifted around in place a bit until he was seated crossed-leg with his back propped against the smooth surface of a nearby cabinet. The Dwarf had a feeling that he was in for a long explanation, so he might as well take the initiative to make himself comfortable.

Bombur snorted, "Not sure. They've just been standing there…staring at each other for the past minute or so. Ori and Nori haven't arrived yet, so Dwalin is without his fighter to defend his honour and we are without our peacekeeper. Balin there doesn't seem to care either way." He waved his hand at the advisor some distance to his left, who was hunched over his desk, half buried in stacks of paperwork.

He did not show any signs of being aware of his surroundings beyond the occasional twitch of his hand from wielding his pen and the odd muttering here and there. Bofur stared bug-eyed at the old Dwarf. "You would think that he'd be a bit worried if a fight breaks out, if not for his brother than for the state of his tent," the miner mused out loud. Bombur shrugged nonchalantly, his movement jostling free a shower of biscuit crumbs from his braided beard, and sent them tumbling down the curve of his stomach.

Bifur scowled, tapped both of his cousins on the shoulders and signalled in Iglishmêk when he had their attention. '*If they fight, we will have to be the ones to restrain Dori. Bofur and I will hold his arms and Bombur, you will tackle his legs.'*

"Why not go for Dwalin instead?" Bombur leaned in to whisper. "Dori is the strongest Dwarf out of the Company and I'm not sure the three of us *could* stop him –"

"So Master Dwalin," Dori's shrilled voice neatly cut through the light murmuring in the room. "Have you been defiling anyone else's little brothers lately?"

The brothers Ur collectively winced.

Bifur's frown deepened and he resumed signalling again with a renewed sense of urgency. '*The three of us can take him. Also, if you look closely, you will see that the others have strategically positioned themselves to dive at Dwalin at the first sign of trouble.'*

Bofur turned his attention back at the group in question for a second glance. Bifur had a point; some time during their conversation, Glóin and Óin had discreetly moved closer to Dwalin until they were flanking him on both sides. Fíli and Kíli had also shifted towards the tall Dwarf from their relaxed lounge against the tent wall, and the princes were exchanging more and more frequent looks of unease as the time passed.

"Quite right," Bofur agreed at the same time that Bombur let out an 'oh!' of understanding. "If that is the case, I think we should…" Bofur tilted his head meaningfully towards Dori. Sharing a final, determined nod, the three Dwarves scrambled up and stepped out of their secured little corner. They shimmied around the tent quietly until they were situated within grabbing distance of the eldest Ri brother. Óin gave the three a fleeting, knowing grin at their arrival.

"Master Dori," Dwalin finally deigned to answer after a lengthy stretch of awkward silence. "I don't make it a habit of defiling any Dwarves." Bofur breathed a sigh of relief in his head at the lack of anger in the warrior's reply, even if his posture was tense like a coiled up spring. Thank Durin that Dwalin has enough sense not to be so easily goaded into a fight. Maybe, just maybe, they could all get through this without devolving into utter chaos.

Bofur's wishful thinking lasted a grand total of three seconds, which was the time it took for Dwalin's serious expression to morph into a dark, reckless smirk. And then, as if Mahal was making it his personal mission to break Bofur's optimistic spirit that evening, the warrior casually crossed his arms over his chest and added smugly, "The only thing I do is snog the adorable ones who call themselves Ori, and I like to do that preferably over a table."

In that moment, the noise drained from the room except for the very audible gasp of shock that all the spectators shared. Glóin doubled over and started to guffaw, his hands slapping over his knee. Bofur closed his eyes in resignation. *Here we go.*

Dori let loose a massive roar so full of rage it shook the earth beneath everyone's feet. He bodily launched himself at Dwalin with his arms stretched out to claw a fistful of the warrior's beard, only to be roughly pinned down by the Ur brothers an arm's length away from reaching the warrior. Fíli and Kíli jumped into the fray a second later with Fíli boldly stepping between the two to deter any further attacks, while Kíli helped Bofur and Bifur to hold the violently thrashing Dori in place. Meanwhile, Óin and Glóin each placed a heavy hand over Dwalin's shoulders, but their efforts to restrain him were unnecessary; Dwalin had not moved from his spot except to raise his brows in surprise.

"I will not let you touch him, not when I am still alive and breathing!" Dori bellowed out dramatically. His face turned an alarming shade of purple-red from his continuous attempt to dislodge the four Dwarves on top of him.

"Please do not antagonize him any further, Master Dwalin!" Bofur pleaded as he strained to keep his grip on Dori's right arm. He had already put his whole weight into immobilizing the Dwarf, but even then Dori was still strong enough to thrash around uselessly. From the corner of his eyes, he could see Bombur, Bifur and Kíli struggling just as much as he was.

Curse the wrathful old Dwarf and his unnatural strength!

"What…in Durin's name is going on in this madhouse?" a deeply amused voice called out from the entrance, neatly interrupting the chaotic scene.

Nine pairs of eyes whipped towards the newcomer. Even Dori stopped to watch in surprise.

"Nori!" Bofur cried out, his otherwise happy greeting tinged with a hint of hysteria. "Thank goodness you are here! A little help would be much appreciated!"

No sooner had he uttered that sentence, Dori wriggled his arm loose from Bofur's hold and delivered a swift upper cut to the miner's chin. Bofur's head snapped back from the strength of the blow, his teeth clacking together loudly. A second blow quickly followed, this time to the stomach, (*an elbow,* Bofur realized belatedly), and he was sent sprawling backwards head first into the fur lined ground.

Dori did not waste any more time. He reached behind and grabbed the closest Dwarf off of him – *Kíli*, Bofur concluded while trying to breathe through his pain from the prince's squeak of terror – and proceeded to *throw* the young Dwarf over his head with a simple flick of his wrist. Poor Kíli was launched screaming into the air into a very surprised Fíli, who instinctively backed into a panicked Glóin. Together, the three landed on the ground in a groaning, tangled mess.

With two of the four Dwarves off of him, Dori effortlessly twisted out of Bombur and Bifur's hold, stopping briefly to punch Bifur in the eye to keep him down. He scrambled to his feet with his robes and his braided silver hair uncharacteristically dishevelled. Like a man possessed, he completely ignored the agonized Dwarves curled by his feet to search for his target. His gaze locked on to the flabbergasted Dwalin.

"You," Dori snarled, shifting his body into a duelling stance, "will rue the day you were born!"

And then, he fell to the ground in an unconscious, loose-limbed pile.

The Dwarves, or at least those who were not still writhing on the floor, gaped at Dori.

When he did not respond, they focused instead on the set of feet that seemed to have materialized behind Dori's crumpled form sometime amidst the fight. They trailed their eyes up the length of the finely made navy robes, skipping over the neatly groomed thick white beard until they came to rest on Balin's face.

Balin stared back serenely, his right hand still raised in the same chopping motion that he had used to incapacitate the oldest Ri brother. “A swift blow to the back of the neck can render anyone unconscious,” he said, completely nonchalant at the *sorcery* that he had just performed. “Now then,” Balin continued lightly, “does anyone have any rope?”

It was shortly after everyone had gathered enough supplies to tend to their wounds that Ori finally made his appearance.

“My apologies for being late, everyone!” he called out in a rush from the entrance, “I hope I haven’t kept you all – just *what* in Durin’s name is going on in this madhouse?”

Ori did a double take at the sight of his friends sitting about the tent in various states of injury. His eyes widened further when he spotted his oldest brother in the corner. “And why is Dori tied to a chair?!” he asked, his voice going high with panic.

“Funny you should say that, I pretty much used the exact phrasing when I came in.” Nori chuckled, his fingers spreading more cooling salve on Bofur’s chin. He grinned a little harder at the small sound of distress that Ori let out upon discovering that his oldest brother was well and truly unconscious. Unlike Nori, Ori had never seen their illustrious brother knocked off his pedestal so it did not surprise the thief that the youngest Ri would be standing shock still.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Nori said dismissively. “We had to keep him calm before he murdered your beau.” The steel in his voice when he had said that term of endearment contrasted with the gentle way he tilted Bofur’s head to look for further bruising. “I’d like to add that for once, it was *not* my suggestion to tie him up. Also, he was already frothing at the mouth in rage when I arrived.”

Bofur muttered something impolite under his breath that made the thief snigger.

Ori paused his frenzied inspection on Dori to shoot a quizzical look at Nori. “Frothing at the mouth?” he repeated slowly. He blanched visibly once Nori’s words had fully registered. “*Murder?!*”

He spun around frantically just in time to see Dwalin trudging towards him and he all but ran the last few steps to close the distance between them. Ori automatically skimmed his fingers down the length of Dwalin’s arms to check for injuries, his eyebrows were furrowed in concern and his lips were pressed together into a thin line.

“I am fine, dear heart,” Dwalin said, voice low with the intention to sooth frazzled nerves, but he did not bother to stop Ori. Instead, he waited patiently until the scribe had seen for himself that all was well before reaching down and gently clasping both of the brunet’s hands in his. “See? I have escaped unscathed,” Dwalin insisted again. Slowly and without looking away, he brought the scribe’s hands close to his lips and laid a gentle kiss on each of his soft palms.

The attractive shade of pink that bloomed across Ori’s cheeks only made his growing smile all the more sweet.

From his seat beside the newly bandaged Bofur, Nori coughed lightly twice. When his little brother and Dwalin made no move to let go of each other, the thief threw his hands in the air and coughed as if he was about to hack up a lung.

The couple *finally* jumped apart and Ori cleared his throat to ask, “So, what actually happened?” He fidgeted with the hem of his sleeves and did not look up from the ground, his embarrassment all too apparent.

“Dori went crazy, that’s what!” Kíli jumped at the first opportunity to complain. “He picked me up and *threw* me into Fíli!” The Dwarf animatedly mimed out the way he had flown in the air.

To his right, Fíli reached over and patted Kíli on the shoulder to calm him down. “If it makes you feel any better, at least you had something soft to land on,” the blond Dwarf said sagely.

“And the both of you fell on top of me, so if anything, I suffered the most here,” Glóin grumbled. He pushed away the bottle of salve that Óin was trying to press into his hands with a scowl. “I’m fine! I’m not the one who got punched!”

Across the room, Bifur, who was dutifully applying his salve on his rapidly swollen eye, looked up and threw a rude hand gesture at Glóin. Glóin glibly ignored him.

“But I don’t understand,” Ori wrapped his arms around himself and stared at the ground, lost in his train of thoughts. “What provoked Dori into such drastic actions?”

Dwalin grunted and rubbed the back of his neck guiltily. “I…lost my temper and may have goaded him into a fight,” he confessed, suddenly feeling deeply ashamed of his actions, especially in the face of Ori’s soft, sad eyes. He continued roughly, “I wanted to present this to Master Dori so that he may approve of it, but I got distracted.”

He swallowed heavily and reached into the inner pocket of his heavy jacket to pull out a flat, beautifully carved oak box that was the length of his hand.

“It is…it’s meant to be my first official courting gift to you. I made these with you in mind.”

Dwalin tentatively placed the box in Ori’s hands and said in a hush, “I hope you will accept this along with all of my affection.”

Not for the first time that evening, the room fell into a pregnant silence. All of the Dwarves stood still and watched in anticipation as Ori slowly popped open the lid.

“Oh Dwalin, these are beautiful,” Ori breathed out. He gingerly lifted a sleek, silver fountain pen of the three that were cushioned in the velvet lining. In the light, he could truly appreciate the exquisiteness of the gift – the intricate details that decorated the barrel were etched with a different, lighter coloured metal, one that Ori could not immediately identify, and the same design continued on the cap, which was also inlaid with two neat rows of tiny sapphires and diamonds. The graceful pointed nib was less extravagant, but nevertheless, it was adorned with thin carvings of traditional Dwarven patterns.

Before Ori could pick up a second pen, Nori stepped up and grasped his brother’s shoulder with one hand. “Master Dwalin,” he began coldly, “last I checked, courting traditions have to be met and that present cannot be accepted until the head of the family has a chance to inspect *and* approve of it.” He let go of Ori and held his hand open. “Since Dori is currently incapacitated, I shall step in to act as the temporary head for now.”

Ori mulishly handed his packet over and promptly crossed his arms over his chest, obviously dissatisfied. “Thank you,” Nori said, completely blasé. Although rarely directed at him, he had seen Ori throw some spectacular tantrums in the past, including the massive spat where he had insisted on going to Erebor and the current one over Dwalin. He was, therefore, not at all afraid of his little brother’s temper.

Nori brought the box closer to his eyes and squinted at the pens appraisingly. He noted each of its weight (and how surprisingly light they were), their unique design and in spite of himself, he could not help but be grudgingly impressed at the beautiful craftsmanship. Dwalin had obviously spent a lot of time and effort into making this present for Ori. Not only did the pens suit the scribe’s profession, they were a perfect blend of practicality and beauty. Nori was loathed to admit that he could not find any fault in them.

The only thing that bothered him was this mysterious, light metal that made up the lines of the design. He raised one of the pens up to shine it in the light, just as Ori had done previously, and sucked in his breath when he figured out what that material was –

“Dear Mahal, is that mithril?!” he blurted out.

All of the Dwarves immediately clamoured closer to see this near priceless gift. Ori’s jaw-dropped and he turned to look back and forth between his brother and Dwalin, unable to process the sheer value of what was given to him.

Dwalin, on the other hand, was the epitome of calm and composure even if he had every right to puff his chest out to boast. “Only the lines of the design are mithril. The rest of the pen casing is platinum. Stronger, more durable than gold,” he explained concisely. “I inherited a small ingot of mithril from my father, which I kept stored away in Erebor’s vaults along with a few items of value. Only recently was I granted access to them again.” He smiled a small, bashful smile at Ori and admitted, “I cannot think of a better way to use the ingot than as a gift to my intended.”

Nori was left without a retort. He did not like Dwalin (and he suspected that this feeling was very much reciprocated), but despite his own biases against the Dwarf from the dealings he had with him in the Blue Mountains, he could not find any legitimate grounds to reject his suit on behalf of Ori. He knew that logically, he should be rejoicing that a high bred Dwarf like Dwalin, son of Fundin, would care to court below his station. After all, Dwarven matches were normally made so that both families benefited from the marriage, and this match between Dwalin and Ori would only serve to bring prestige to the Ri family…

Nori fought to contain his sly grin. He may have just figured out his point of attack against Dwalin after all.

“Master Dwalin,” Nori purred and Dwalin stiffened from the sudden change in his tone of voice, “this is a very generous gift, and you have most definitely outdone yourself with it.” The thief snapped the box shut. “However, I must admit, I am a bit taken aback by both the gift and your desire to court our Ori.”

Still holding the box, Nori clasped his hands behind his back and slowly circled Dwalin like a predator scenting blood. “Let us not beat around the bush: a high ranking Dwarf who also happens to be *rich* in life experience such as yourself could find a suitably experienced Dwarf of equal status as his consort. Now,” he paused in his pacing to round on Dwalin, “why is it that you have chosen sweet Ori?”

He ignored Ori’s spluttering and ploughed forward with his argument, “I find the inequality of this match to be greatly distressing. Firstly, as I have mentioned before, you could have easily chosen a Dwarf of noble blood to bring prestige into your family and instead, you choose to join your family with ours. Not to say that our family is anything to be ashamed of, but we are no sons of Fundin.” Nori casually buffed his nails against his heavy wool tunic, looking bored. “And then you show up with a gift made with *mithril* of all things, and I cannot even begin to know how we can reciprocate such a grandiose, priceless offer, not even with our share of Erebor’s gold, but of course, you must have known all this beforehand.”

Dwalin’s eyes followed Nori’s, his posture and expression giving nothing away.

Nori narrowed his eyes and he dropped all pretences at playfulness. “Which brings me to question, just what is it that you seek to exploit when you have decided to *buy* your way into my brother’s hand in courtship? His youth? His innocence?”

“Now listen here, Master Nori,” Balin stepped forward and exclaimed in indignant fury, “just what exactly are you insinuating here? You have gone too far –”

Dwalin held his hand up to silence his incensed brother. “Master Nori, I do not see this situation the same way as you do,” he rumbled calmly and Nori was starting to hate his unbreakable composure a little. “To me, prestige in a Dwarf is gained through the brave deeds he commits. It is to my understanding that Ori was the one who insisted on undertaking the quest to reclaim Erebor despite knowing that he is not experienced in fighting.”

“And yet, he faced all of the journey’s challenges most admirably.” Dwalin shook his head in disbelief, and he continued with wonder colouring his words, “I cannot begin to imagine the bravery he must possess to stubbornly persevere through it all, to choose to fight knowing that the odds were constantly stacked against him, and to come out as a survivor.”

Even though Dwalin was speaking to Nori, it was Ori who continued to catch the warrior’s attention. The tenderness and warmth in Dwalin’s eyes were unmistakable. “So you see Master Nori, I hold Ori in the highest respect. The way I see it, it is he who will bring honour to me and my family if he accepts my suit, not so much as the other way around.”

“Now, as for the matter about the mithril,” he carried on calmly, “what is a piece of metal compared to all of the time and effort that Ori had spent into crafting all those knitted gifts for me?”

Nori frowned, obviously confused. He spun around quickly so much so that his little brother stepped back with a nervous little squeak. “Wait a minute,” Nori asked, squinting suspicious eyes at Ori, “just how many things did you knit for him?”

“Um…er…”

“Twenty nine items,” Dwalin interjected confidently. He began to list them out without missing a beat: “three pairs of socks, three pairs of gloves, two scarves, three jumpers, two woollen caps, one tea cosy with four matching mug warmers and four matching coasters, and finally, one blanket that is currently in the works.”

“And in return, I gave him three pens.” Dwalin raised an incredulous brow at a gobsmacked Nori. “Quite frankly Master Nori, the pens are really the *least* I could do.”

The Company Members simultaneously turned their attention towards Ori. Completely frozen, the scribe made the most peculiar, distressed sound from the back of his throat between closed lips, one that reminded the Dwarves of the pitiful cries of a wounded baby animal, and ever so slowly, Ori buried his face in his hands, leaving the flaming red tips of his ears visible.

“Oh, this is unbelievable!” Kíli whispered loudly to Fíli, undisturbed by Ori’s display of pitiful mortification in the brash, shameless way that was so characteristic of the young Dwarf, “I didn’t even get a single scarf while Dwalin gets to hoard a pile of knitted goods! How is this fair?”

Fíli rolled his eyes and did not bother to dignify that comment with a response.

“There there, laddie!” Balin cooed and he rubbed soothing circles on Ori’s hunched back. Let it be known that Balin did not keep his position as the king’s advisor for this many years without knowing when to step in to do damage control. “I thought your knitting was absolutely lovely. All those different patterns and colours, they are wonderful pieces and one can never have too many knitted things! Dwalin clearly appreciates all of them. Why, I never see him without at least two pieces of your knitwear on his body!”

“My apologies if I have embarrassed you, dear heart.” Dwalin seamlessly chimed in and sounding appropriately contrite. He did not need to take his brother’s cue of warning to *fix this, now.* “But a Dwarf can only be humble for so long when his beloved has gifted him with twenty nine, hand-made presents –”

“You memorized everything I made and you just…listed them all out like you were doing inventory,” came Ori’s distressed words, muffled by his hand. “You made me sound like a crazy person! A crazy person with a *thing* for knitting!”

“– all of them so beautifully made as well! It is not my intention to imply that anything is wrong with you – ”

“I stress knit is all! There is nothing wrong with that!”

“ – and I am fully aware of your habit of stress knitting, love. You are right, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.”

“You weren’t supposed to know about the blanket either.” Ori still refused to look up but at least, he sounded less miserable than just moments ago. “How did you even know about the blanket?”

“I may have discovered it by accident when I tripped over one of your large baskets of yarn,” and upon realizing how saying *that* would not help his case at all, Dwalin quickly amended, “because I am clumsy. Extremely clumsy. It was through no fault of your own!”

Bombur shuffled beside his brother and whistled lowly at what could only be described as Dwalin *fretting*. “Funny how Master Dwalin had managed to maintain a perfectly cool head during Master Nori’s interrogation, but he lost it the moment young Ori was displeased with him.”

"Aye, love makes fools of us all," Bofur agreed, his good cheer rapidly returning. It was not every day that one got to witness the unflappable Master Dwalin flounder.

"Alright, enough! If the both of you would stop this shameful display, I do not want to be caught up in your lovers' tiff!" Nori shuddered a little in disgust and glared at the warrior. Sure, he had wanted to see Dwalin being taken down a peg or two but to see him wrapped around his little brother's finger so thoroughly was downright pathetic. However, he cannot help but feel a *little* sorry for the poor bastard. Ori could be a tad too sensitive to other people's comments. Nori himself had had the unpleasant experience of having to calm a desperately wailing Ori many years ago from some off-handed remark he had accidently made.

He had never been so grateful to accept his older brother's help that day.

Ori slowly lowered his hands to peak nervously at his brother. "Nori? Does that mean…?" He gestured meaningfully at the box that Nori was still holding.

Nori sighed. Master Dwalin's retort was surprisingly eloquent, well thought out, and before he made that terrible faux pas to list all twenty nine knitted gifts, surprisingly… sweet. The Dwarf had clearly thought that Ori hung the moon and the stars of Middle-Earth and likewise, anyone could see how enamoured Ori was with Master Dwalin. Dori had tried to separate the two to absolutely no effect and now, even Nori's quick thinking had failed him in finding a legitimate excuse to refuse the tall Dwarf.

Nori may not like this but he could recognize when he was beat. Besides, what were his alternatives? If he chose to deny Master Dwalin now, it would be seen as an insult to the sons of Fundin and he would risk offending close members of that branch of the family, which may or may not include Glóin and Óin, he wasn't too sure.

Worse still, he would have to deal with Ori's hurt disappointment if he turned down Master Dwalin's offer. Nori could not even begin to imagine the backlash he would receive from his own little brother, but he had a feeling that he would inadvertently end up alienating Ori from himself and Dori.

No, the hollow victory he would gain from winning against that self-righteous Dwarf was not worth losing his little brother.

Gritting his teeth and clenching his fists tightly, the thief gave Ori a single, stiff nod, and no sooner had he given his consent did he find himself with an armful of his little brother.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Ori said in a rush, his head buried under Nori's chin on his right side, his arms wrapped firmly around his middle. Nori could not even remember when it was the last time he had held Ori like this, and a warm wave of nostalgia washed over him. Slowly, he raised his arms to return the hug.

"I do not like him, Ori," Nori muttered into his little brother's soft hair, "but I hope you know what you are doing." He reluctantly pulled back to smooth out Ori's flyaway hair and to straighten his crooked braids. "Also, don't think that Dori will make this easy for him either," Nori warned. "You better tell lover-boy to smarten up around that old cog."

The bright smile of utter jubilation that lit up Ori's face helped soothe the lingering traces of bitterness in Nori's heart. He supposed that granting his brother this one small moment of happiness was the least he could do.

Dear Mother,

Kíli and I have successfully infiltrated the farms for the past few days to give you further insight on Uncle and Bilbo's activities. *(Hello Mum! Farming is terribly boring. I don't understand how you can stand it!)* It's a good thing that we had our Project to keep our minds occupied! You would not believe how much progress we have made on our stories. Who would have thought that a menial task like tilling the earth could inspire so much creativity?

(Uncle and Bilbo also provided a bit of entertainment. The way they gravitated towards each other was absolutely adorable, but even that got stale really quickly. I mean, after watching them for three days straight only to see that they have not gotten anywhere with each other beyond the casual, suspiciously excessive touching, one begins to lose hope a little.)

We included our spy reports to this letter! You can judge for yourself and see what we meant!

On a different note, the Company – minus Uncle and Bilbo, of course – had a meeting to confirm the contents for the third set of the pamphlets. The meeting itself was full of excitement; this time, the focus was on the Ri brothers and Master Dwalin. (*Poor Master Dwalin*.) Master Dwalin took the initiative to offer his first courting present to Ori but unfortunately for him, both Master Dori and Master Nori dislike him intensely; Master Dori was much too over-protective of Ori while…

Say Kíli, do you know why Master Nori even dislikes Master Dwalin?

(No idea. It wasn't as if they spoke much to each other during the quest either. Maybe something had happened in the Blue Mountains. It wouldn't surprise me, what with Master Nori's apparent familiarity with activities of dubious legality).

So…what you're saying is that Master Dwalin might have arrested Master Nori on numerous occasions in the past?

Suddenly, everything makes so much more sense.

Between the three of them, I was surprised that the tent was still standing! *(Dori leapt at Master Dwalin when he bragged about snogging Ori, Mum! I have never seen a Dwarf so intent on murder before.)* Even after the rest of the members got together to restrain both Dwarves, Dori still had enough strength to break out of his hold. *(We had four Dwarves piled on top of him with myself being one of them, and he threw us off like we weighed nothing! He literally picked me up with one hand and tossed me aside! It was terrifying!)* Thankfully, Balin stepped in to save the day with a blow that knocked Dori unconscious.

Come to think of it, Master Dwalin had gotten lucky from that or else he never would've been able give his courting present to Ori. *(Master Nori, who was acting as head of the family, gave Master Dwalin a hard time as it is, but at least there were no physical punches being thrown! He also did end up approving the present even though he had done so very grudgingly.)*

We were finally able to start our meeting once Dori woke up with his sanity restored. He apologized profusely to the members of the Company and promised to have a civil talk with Master Dwalin. *(Why did I feel like running for cover when I heard that?)* It's probably your survival instinct kicking in to keep you far, far away from the potential war zone where this 'civil' talk will take place. Or it could be your reaction to a newly instilled fear for Dori after you were launched into the air, screaming for your dear life by his hands. *(Hey! I'd like to see you retain your composure if you had to go through what I went through! Also, I did not scream! It was at most a startled, but very manly yelp.)*

As I was saying before, the contents of the pamphlet were discussed extensively during the meeting and we all agreed on publishing three short stories. If this pamphlet is well received, we shall publish another pamphlet with a new set of stories. We can even make it a bi-monthly publication if we can manage it! *(We were wondering if you are interested in having your story be a part of this pamphlet? The second piece will be written by Fíli and I, while the third by Masters Bofur and Nori, so we are pretty confident that this publication will be the best thing to grace Middle-Earth in the entirety of its existence.)* Move aside, Fulla and Buri! There is a new classic in the making!

We have attached a separate page that contains more instructions regarding this if you are interested! *(I hope you will say yes, Mum! I can't wait to see what you have plotted. You always tell the best kinds of stories while Uncle's tend to be overly melodramatic!)* Don't tell Uncle we said that though. I think we might hurt his feelings.

With all our love,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 20 Mar., 2942.

PS. Have you told Uncle about that label yet? I still have my reservations about this Teleporno fellow …

To my two darling sons who clearly inherited their superior taste in good story telling from me,

Thank you for your latest report regarding the events at the farm. It has been extremely informative and I agree that your Uncle has been dragging his feet long enough. It's time that I send him another letter. Brace yourselves, boys. You might want to run for cover, or make yourselves scarce least he takes his frustration out on you both.

I have also attached a draft of my story. Briefly – I have drawn inspiration from the mythos surrounding Mahal and his wife Yavanna to demonstrate that the union between Master Baggins and your Uncle is not only divine in nature, but it is of good omen. That ought to silence those old, suspicious traditionalists from grumbling about an "unnatural" marriage when a marriage *does* happen. Please pass this draft on to Master Nori in your next meeting along with my most heartfelt congratulations to both Master Dwalin and young Ori. I honestly wish them all the luck in the world, because they most certainly need every bit of it if they have to face the combined powers of Master Nori and Master Dori.

I have also included a packet of klamath weed for Master Dwalin to help him in dealing with an overly anxious future brother-in-law. I recommend that he infuse two to three teaspoons of the herb per cup of hot water before serving this tea to Master Dori. It will help relax the Dwarf a little and lift his spirit, among other things.

Oh stop looking at me like that. It won't *kill* him.

No Fíli, I have not told your Uncle about the label. I shall do so when the opportunity presents itself. Also, there is absolutely nothing wrong with Teleporno, aside from possessing the bad luck of having parents with terrible naming skills. Your suspicion is completely unfounded.

With love,

Your most honourable and talented mother

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

To my dear brother whose nonexistence progress in his love life makes me weep tears of frustration,

A little birdy has told me that you and Master Baggins were seen frolicking in the fields, prancing about with laughter ringing in the air and looking very much like a pair of young Dwarves in love. Apparently, the two of you also looked like you could be re-enacting that famous scene where Fulla and Buri were running hand-in-hand in a field of wildflowers towards the sunset.

As disturbing as that mental picture is (as with all mental pictures where you are doing any sort of prancing in a field of wildflowers), I feel compelled to ask: why have you not began to court your Hobbit?

For Mahal's sake, I have not seen you this relaxed towards anyone in over a century. For you to let your guard down like that pretty much just shows how incredibly fond you are of Master Baggins. What is holding you back? Last I checked with his relatives, Master Baggins was a bachelor and he had not expressed any love interest for any of the hobbits in Hobbiton, so you don't have to worry about any hidden competition. Don't tell me that there is someone brazen enough to vie for Master Baggins' attention at the camp?

With love,

Your concerned sister Dís who will go to extreme means to help you secure your Hobbit including murder, torture and extortion.

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

From Erebor, 2942.

To my insane sister Dís whose loyalty is flattering but she will, under no circumstance, murder , torture or extort my non-existent competitors,

Why do I feel resigned to the fact that any news regarding any sort of interaction between myself and Bilbo Baggins will make its way back to you? Your obsession to see me paired up with the Hobbit terrifies me, sister. I do not remember you being this fanatically nor emotionally invested in anything, not even during that odd phase in your life where you have penned out pages of smut disguised as "tasteful romantic novellas" and then forced Frerin and I to read them.

There was nothing tasteful about those by the way. Don't think I have forgotten how you had blatantly lied to us.

However, you are right in saying that I am…more than fond of Master Baggins. Never have I met anyone as brave, selfless, and *little* as he who will go to such great lengths to ensure my happiness. The oddest thing is that he is not doing this because I am the King Under the Mountain. Instead, his reasons were that I am, in his own words, "a most confounded, stubborn Dwarf with an overprotective streak a mile-wide who cannot tell the difference between a warren hoe and a scuffle hoe, so kindly move over and let me do my work."

His presence fills me with great hope for the future and I cannot imagine myself happier if he would honour me by becoming my consort.

I suppose you can be the first to hear this (and I would imagine that it would please you greatly): I have every intention to court Bilbo, but I have held myself back since I was afraid that I would scare him away with my advances. I wish there was a more subtle way in which I could use to gauge his interest.

There, now I have told you the truth. Now kindly stop harassing Bilbo's relatives.

- Thorin

To my dear older brother,

Of course it pleases me to hear that you have found someone worthy of your love and who could bring you so much joy! For the record, I cannot be happier that you have come to the decision to court Master Baggins. He seems like an absolutely lovely person and I cannot wait to meet him in person.

As for your fear of scaring him away, I think you are not giving him the credit he deserves, brother. By your own words, you admitted that Master Baggins is a brave and tenacious Hobbit who values you as his friend. I believe that if you were to take the chance and be upfront with your intentions, he would rise beyond your expectations.

Or you can take the cowardly option and slip the picture I have attached to this letter under his pillow and wait to see how he will respond.

What you are seeing is my newest label for my honey mead product. What do you think?

Your loving sister, (who will most definitely be celebrating tonight because finally, there is progress!)

Dís

Thorin's Hall, 2942.

PS: By the way, the caravan of Dwarves from the Blue Mountains should be arriving to Erebor soon. I trust that you have received the latest correspondence from Captain Náli, who is leading the expedition.

From Erebor, 2942.
I WILL NOT SLIP A BARE CHESTED PICTURE OF MYSELF UNDER HIS PILLOW!
CEASE AND DESIST THE PRODUCTION OF THAT LABEL THIS INSTANT!
- Thorin

To my brother who likes to overreact,

Before you go on your rampage, there is method to my madness. As I have told you before, my Elven competitors have created an entirely pretentious, nature-themed piece of art for their product label. Their design served to brand their product as something boring and high-end; they are basically saying that their classy beverage is for their equally classy, high-end clientele.

Their message represents everything that my company and I are against. Our brewery prides itself in being welcoming to all people no matter their age, status, sex or race. As long as a celebration is in town, we will be more than happy to provide for them. What better way to show this than through an image of an iconic, honourable, noble Dwarven king loosening up and having fun with everyone else? By having your image on that bottle in a room full of happy people, it's as if you are there in spirit to join in their celebrations!

If you are still not convinced, I have also conducted a survey in asking some of my customers' opinion on the label. The Dwarves praised your bravery in battle and in allowing your image to be used for our product, unlike those "cowardly, emotionless tree-shaggers who wouldn't know fun, not even if it bit them in their arses." In addition, 73% of the Men clientele expressed their interest to meet and shake hands with you after seeing this label, with 88% believing you to be a likeable ruler without having ever met you.

When being made to choose between our label and the Elves', 79% of all the survey takers have chosen ours. Clearly, not only does this design prove to be much more popular than the Elves', it also serves to increase your popularity in a positive way.

Of course, if you are still unwilling to have your image on the label, I can change it so that someone else can be the mascot. Teleporno himself has expressed great interest to be the face of the Honey Mead line, although I am sure the Dwarves who took the survey would be disappointed by the change. I leave this entirely up to you.

Your loving sister,
Dís
Thorin's Hall, 2942.
PS: So does that mean you will be confronting Master Baggins about your intention to court him then?

From Erebor, 2942.
To my evil, manipulative sister Dís,

You may use my image on the label only if my chest is fully covered. I would also like to be depicted with my fur surcoat. The grey-brown one.

And yes, I have been communicating with Captain Náli. We are making the proper arrangements for the arrival of the Blue Mountain Dwarves.

- Thorin
PS: Yes.

Dear Mother,

I hope you are doing well! A few members of the Company have some messages that they would like to pass on to you so we thought we'd combine all of these into one letter.

First of all, Master Nori thanks you for your manuscript and has included the first draft of the pamphlet (attached to this letter) for your perusal. He invites your constructive criticism and wishes you a pleasant day.

Secondly, Master Dwalin thanks you for your well wishes and your…special delivery. Unfortunately, he does not feel that he should be drugging Master Dori since it would be a breach of trust and it would lead to a bad start in what he hoped to be their peace talk.

(We tried to tell him that it's only a breach of trust if he gets caught, but he wouldn't listen! I felt that our reasoning was pretty legit! I can't imagine what could have caused him to give us that look of utter disapproval.) Some Dwarves are funny in the head like that, Kíli. Pay him no mind.

Instead of using it on Master Dori, Master Dwalin is thinking of making that herbal tea for himself so that he could make this "undoubtedly bloody unpleasant experience more bloody bearable".

Finally, Master Ori has a question regarding the drawing that accompanies your story. He would like to know how you want Master Baggins and Uncle to be drawn *(specifically, their clothing, their poses and the expressions that they are wearing)*.

That's all the messages that we have! *(By the way, we all read your story and we really, really liked it! I think it's our favourite piece out of all the stuff we've written!)* That's because Mum's a great story teller. I have a feeling that the rest of the camp will like her piece as well.

Lots and lots of love,
Fíli and Kíli
Erebor, 24 Mar., 2942.

To my dear boys,

It seems like today is a day of celebrations! First off, your Uncle has finally confirmed what we all knew already: he is deeply fond of Master Baggins and will ask the Hobbit for his permission to court him.

A monumental step forward, I know. I did not even have the heart to mock him for taking so long! To be honest, I think I am still in a state of shock over all of this.

I have also shown him the label and after some persuasion, he has agreed to allow the use of his image for our honey mead product. His only stipulations were that his shirt be fully buttoned and that his characteristic fur surcoat be depicted. You no longer need to fear for your lives for possessing that label, boys!

Now, regarding the inquiries I have received in your previous letter, please pass on the following:

Master Nori – I have gone through the draft of the pamphlet and I do not have any issues. Please keep up the fantastic work and do let me know if you would like me to write another piece.

Master Dwalin – You have always been an honourable Dwarf and anyone who could call themselves your brother-in-law is truly fortunate. I wish you the best of luck in your endeavour. Try not to overdose yourself on that tea.

Master Ori – I would like you to draw the scene where the King and Master Baggins are standing at the altar, exchanging their vows. Please have the King be in his full armour, although with a more…rugged edge to him. Ask Fíli for that honey mead label (rest assured, he will understand what you mean). That is the version of the King that I feel would best fit with the story. As for Master Baggins, I would like him to be depicted as one of Yavanna's children, so please incorporate a lot of leafy greenery into his clothing. Also, have him wear a crown of wild flowers, such as roses, buttercups, lilies, and violets for example. I leave the flower selection to your discretion.

As always, please keep me updated on the progress around the camp and at the farm! If everything goes well, we will all be able to breathe a sigh of relief that the two oblivious idiots will cease to be oblivious idiots.

All the love in the world,
Your mother
Thorin's Hall, 2942.

Bilbo wasn't sure why he had not told Thorin about his incident with Borin. He supposed that in the wake of Dáin's sincere apology, he was lulled into believing that this situation was resolved and that he could put the memory of that nasty encounter behind him.

Bilbo should have known that things have never gone smoothly for him, at least not since Gandalf had shown up and tempted him away from the safety of his Hobbit hole.

From across the field, he could feel Borin's gaze burn into the back of his head, causing the hair on his nape to rise. It would have been so easy to turn around and return the Dwarf's hard glare, or to walk on over and *confront* Borin on his boorish, unpleasant attitude, consequences be damned.

I earned my position as a member of Thorin's Company and as Thorin's advisor with tears, sweat and blood, an angry (and decidedly Tookish) part of Bilbo's mind rallied for the fifth time that afternoon, *I ought to go over there and give him a piece of my mind!*

Bilbo paused in his digging, his fingers gripping so tightly on the trowel's wooden handle that his knuckles turned bone white, but he forced himself to breathe deeply through his nose. Slowly, he exhaled, letting the tense muscles in his shoulders, his arms and his back relax.

It was unusual for his temper to flare up like that, but Borin's passive aggressive display had been going on for close to a week already. With every passing hour, Bilbo could feel himself becoming more on edge, making him more snappish

and irritable than usual. The only thing holding him back from a fight was his sensible Baggins nature reminding him that it would be *most* inappropriate to squabble in the field like a pair of schoolchildren.

"Is he bothering you again, Mister Baggins?" Haldan asked softly from his spot a few feet to Bilbo's right. Like the Hobbit, he was crouched over the soil with his back determinately facing the Iron Hills Dwarf. He daren't turn around to look behind him least he accidentally start a confrontation.

"It's nothing," Bilbo grunted and went back to his seed planting. "It is just a bit of excessive glaring on his part. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"It is downright unnerving, that's what it is!" Haldan huffed crossly. He imbedded his trowel into the earth before stretching his stiff back and shoulders. "I don't know how you can stand it. I could barely get through yesterday with the way that Borin and that other one were breathing down my neck."

"Frór," Bilbo automatically corrected. He stopped and turned to Haldan in surprise, "Wait, they have been giving you grief too?"

"Aye. I could feel their eyes following me wherever I go. It's a tad eerie."

Bilbo had found himself spending more time with Haldan out in the field ever since that Incident. They had unexpectedly bonded through their mutual love of farming, their mutual dislike of the Iron Hills advisors, and their mutual feeling of inadequacy for their posts as their Kings' advisors. Although Bilbo has been enjoying this newfound friendship, (more importantly, at finding someone whom he could talk about gardening without their eyes glazing over like Thorin's tend to do), he suspected that his proximity with Haldan inadvertently made the other advisor a target.

"Maybe they are picking on you because they see us working together," Bilbo frowned, not at all liking the idea but he was honest enough to admit its plausibility. "If that is the case, then I'm sorry for dragging you into this mess."

Haldan shrugged and gave Bilbo a crooked grin, "Don't worry about me, Mister Baggins. Glares of disapproval are nothing new to me. Although …" he trailed off as he slowly uncurled from his crouched position to sit cross-legged and straight-backed on the ground. "Are they this bold when King Thorin is around as well? Surely, the King must have noticed their open display of animosity towards you." He looked around his surroundings questioningly and asked, "Speaking of which, where is the King this fine afternoon?"

Bilbo gently patted down the small mound of soil over his newly planted seeds as he answered, "Thorin has been rather busy with making all the necessary arrangements for the arrival of the Blue Mountain Dwarves. He isn't working at the farms today because of that."

This time, it was Haldan's turn to look at Bilbo in confusion. "The Blue Mountain Dwarves have arrived already? I thought they would take a lot longer to get here."

"The travel conditions were much better than they had all anticipated so their journey was swifter than predicted. They haven't arrived yet; I think they still have a few more days to travel." Bilbo inched forward and dug another small hole in the ground. He muttered a quick thanks to Haldan when the advisor wordlessly handed him a new satchel of seeds. "Apparently Gandalf is traveling with them. Having a Wizard in the party probably helped too."

"A Wizard? Gandalf?! As in Gandalf the Grey?" Bilbo heard Haldan's characteristic squeak and he raised a brow at his friend's nervousness. The Hobbit wondered what sort of reputation the Wizard must have had among the Men to have garnered such a look of nervous awe from Haldan.

"Oh, he's harmless. I wouldn't worry about him." Bilbo said, purposely sounding uninterested in hopes of calming Haldan. The advisor tended to get easily worked up over any sort of unexpected surprise. Eru only knows what the knowledge of Gandalf's arrival is doing to Haldan's heart.

"Although," Bilbo added distractedly, suddenly remembering a memory from a lifetime ago, "he does have the habit of walking into someone's life, completely disrupting their plans unapologetically and he won't take 'Good Morning' as an answer to go away."

Haldan paled further and choked out, "Disrupting plans?!"

It had occurred to Bilbo (not for the first time since getting to know Haldan, if he was honest with himself) that the advisor would be perfectly suited as a Hobbit, what with his love of greenery and his fear of unpredictability.

"Well, I hardly doubt he would interfere with the matters of the Men." Or at least Bilbo hoped so for the sake of Haldan's sanity. "I'm sure you will get along fine with him. He even got along with Thorin and all of the others."

"Why wouldn't anyone get along with King Thorin or the Company?" Haldan asked, his curiosity momentarily distracting him from his panic.

Bilbo scoffed. "The first time I met the Dwarves," he began as he slowly buried more seeds, "they barged into my home, cleaned out my pantry, ruined the plumbing of my house, threw my plates and cutleries around while singing, *and* tracked mud all over the floor." He reached for a nearby sprouting weed and violently wrenched it out of the earth. Haldan flinched.

"*Then*," Bilbo whirled around with the plant clutching unnecessarily tightly in his hand, "Thorin showed up and not even a minute into the meeting he had completely dismissed me by calling me a *grocer*. And let me tell you," Bilbo pointed the leafy portions of the weed at Haldan, wielding it like a pointer stick, "he hadn't meant it as a compliment either!"

Haldan grimaced. "They sounded like they were real menaces."

"They most certainly were!" Bilbo harrumphed and tossed the weed into an empty burlap sack that Haldan had dutifully handed over.

"So," Haldan started after a brief moment of silence, "what made you change your mind about King Thorin?"

"Oh, a lot of things." Bilbo said without looking up. He wiped the sweat off his brow with a grimace, but he carried on with his planting. "His loyalty, for one, and his stubborn dedication to do right by his people without sparing a single thought to what his actions would do to his own health. His courage that borderlines on insanity," Bilbo shook his head at that in displeasure. "I mean, who else would be willing to confront a live dragon with just thirteen other people? Madness, complete madness!"

"When you turn the table and do something courageous to help *him*, he yells at you for being foolish! Seeds please," Bilbo reached into the bag of seeds that was handed to him and scattered a handful into the little well he had dug into the soil. He automatically gave the seed pouch back to Haldan once he was done. "Afterwards, he would hover around you for days on end despite you insisting that you are *perfectly* fine, thank you very much! But of course, he won't listen because he is immensely over-protective and he probably feels guilty for having failed you, which is utterly ridiculous because he is setting himself up for failure from the unreasonably high standard he has for himself."

"And don't get me started on his dry, sarcastic sense of humour that he wields like a weapon or…or his singing!" Bilbo uprooted a tuft of yellow foxtail and tossed it in the bag with the other weeds. He then traded the sack for the bag of seeds that Haldan was holding. "That blasted Ballad of Bilbo Baggins was downright mesmerizing to listen to when he sings using the deepest register of his voice, but Eru forbid if you say anything. It will only inflate his ego."

"And he – what?" Bilbo interrupted himself when he spotted Haldan's happy, warm grin.

"I'm glad to know that the announcement is real after all!" Haldan reached for Bilbo's free hand, the one not clutching the bag of seeds, and gave him an enthusiastic handshake. "Congratulations!"

Bilbo's immediate response was to blink up at his friend in confusion. "I'm sorry, but…what?"

"Your relationship with King Thorin, of course!" Haldan said with good cheer although a flicker of self-doubt crossed his face. "What? Are the two of you not in a courtship? You are the talk of the camp!"

In that instance, Bilbo felt everything around him coming to a halt.

Wait, what?

What?

"What?" Bilbo croaked out, his mouth gone very, very dry. The bag of seeds slipped from his listless fingers and fell to the ground unnoticed.

Haldan's hands flew over his mouth, "I'm so, so sorry, Mister Baggins," he began to babble nervously, "I just thought that you were trying to make an announcement from those pamphlets that were circulating the camp…not that I could read them because they were written in Khuzdûl, but I though the images were especially telling since they were so romantic and…and…" Haldan gulped and wheezed out in the tiniest of voice, "I am going to stop talking now."

Announcement? Pamphlets?!

A million and one thoughts were swimming around Bilbo's head, most of them were variations of exclamations like, '*What?*" and '*Oh Eru*'. Still, the Hobbit managed to say, if a little woodenly from shock, "Show me."

If he were more coherent, Bilbo would have been proud to have managed even that.

Haldan rubbed the back of his neck in discomfort as he reached into his tunic with his free hand. "Promise me you will not panic," he pleaded desperately. Again, if Bilbo was more coherent, he would have appreciated the irony of being told this by Haldan of all people.

And then, he saw the pamphlet.

He panicked.

"Thorin!" Bilbo burst through their tent in alarm, his clothing rumpled and his hair wild from the hurried pony ride he had taken to return back to the camp. "Thorin! You have to see this!"

The tent was disappointingly empty, but from the scattered paper and the mug of half drunk tea that lay on Thorin's desk, Bilbo would guess that the Dwarf had just recently left outside.

Heaving a desperate sigh, Bilbo dragged himself to the nearest chair – Thorin's – and collapsed right into it.

This is a right disaster, he thought glumly while bringing his hand up to massage his temple. For the first time in a long while, the Hobbit was at a complete loss as to what he should do. According to Haldan, these pamphlets had been circulating for the past week and were extremely popular within the Dwarven army. How was it possible for something so big to have gone on for a week without him or *Thorin* noticing?

Bilbo pulled out the now crumbled pamphlet from his jacket pocket and flipped to the first page, hoping to understand its purpose more. Imbedded amongst the neat, even lines of cirth was a stunning image of what looked like Bilbo and Thorin's wedding day. The two were dressed in spectacular costumes and they were standing at the altar with their hands clasped. The Hobbit cringed at the tender, besotted look that Bilbo from the drawing was giving to his groom.

By the Valars, just how obvious were his feelings for the Dwarf that some unknown artist would have been able to pick them up? Did he really look like some love drunk Hobbitling whenever he looked at Thorin? If that was the case, it was a miracle that the Dwarf was still willing to put up with his foolishness. It was either that or Thorin valued his friendship to the point of not wanting to hurt his feelings, even if it meant that the Dwarven King had to endure being awkwardly fawned over.

Bilbo ignored the stinging in his eyes and determinately flipped to the second page. This time, it had an image of the two battling some large, mystical, serpentine creature together. Bilbo snorted at the look of ferociousness that the Hobbit in the drawing was sporting. Alright, perhaps the artist had not based his characters' expressions on those belonging to their real life counterparts. There was no way that Bilbo could ever sport that impressive look of protective viciousness.

Bilbo placed the open pamphlet on his lap to press his palms into his tired eyes. He let loose a weary groan filled with abject misery. As much as he hated to admit it, the Hobbit still could not understand the purpose of these pamphlets. Were they created to mock him and the King? The sheer beauty of these drawings suggested otherwise. It was obvious that the artist had taken great care to portray Thorin and Bilbo as accurately as possible, exaggerated expressions of adoration and determination aside. The attention to detail on the characters was particularly praise-worthy, especially from the way the artist had drawn the delicate folds of clothing, the realistic hair texture, the vividness of the characters' frozen, happy expressions…

Bilbo slowly traced Thorin's inked profile with his finger, feeling the smoothness of the paper beneath his touch. If the images were meant to be a mockery, Bilbo and Thorin would have been drawn as crude caricatures of themselves doing equally crude things rather than...hold hands and fight terrible creatures. Whoever the artist was, it was evident that not only has he created these drawings as a labour of love, but he held great respect for the Hobbit and his King.

Bilbo found himself unexpectedly cheered with that conclusion in mind. At least Thorin and he were not hated.

That's right, Bilbo Baggins, he thought a little desperately as he mindlessly flipped to the third and last page of the pamphlet, *just keep looking for that silver lining.*

On a whim, he peered down at the page and he froze, his face heating immediately.

There, in all of its black and white glory, was an image of Thorin and Bilbo locked in a very passionate embrace, kissing fervently without a care in the world.

Bilbo stared, entranced.

There was absolutely nothing innocent about the kiss in that picture; the two were pressed together, hungrily devouring each other's mouths. Bilbo was desperately clutching at Thorin's surcoat while Thorin was cupping the back of Bilbo's head with one hand, the other wrapped firmly around the Hobbit's waist. Thorin's chest armour was missing and his tunic was open, allowing a tantalizing glimpse of naked skin. A few dark strands of the Dwarf's hair lay curled just above his clavicle, and Bilbo suppressed the ridiculous urge to reach over and tuck these strands back with the rest of his hair that was cascading over his broad, muscled back.

Clearing his throat uncomfortably, Bilbo unbuttoned his collar to alleviate the heat he was feeling. He wondered what it would feel like to have Thorin hold him like that, to have Thorin's large, strong hands boldly skimming across his back, his hips, his chest, to feel his soft kisses trail down the column of his neck.

A hand landed on his shoulder, and he jumped out of his seat, screaming. The Hobbit whirled around, pressing his back against the desk to face the intruder.

"My apologies for startling you Bilbo," Thorin greeted pleasantly. His hands were raised in a universal sign of harmlessness. "I'm surprised to see you back so early! What were you looking at that has gotten you so distracted…"

To Bilbo's horror, Thorin's eyes trailed to the floor and landed on the pamphlet that fell off of Bilbo's lap in his mad dash to get off the chair.

And it just so happened that the pamphlet was opened to the very same page with *that* very same image that had inspired him to daydream.

The two stood still in awkward silence. Thorin looked at the image with his brows furrowed, looked up at Bilbo, then looked back down at the image again to Bilbo's growing mortification.

Don't panic, don't panic, Bilbo thought, racking his brain to come up with a rational explanation that will not make him seem like a complete pervert.

He failed. He sensibly decided to start praying fervently for the floor to swallow him whole instead.

Thorin wordlessly picked up the pamphlet and he started to casually flip through the rest of the pages. Compelled to give some sort of an explanation, Bilbo blurted out, "I, um, just found out about this just now. This is why I'm here. Early. Why I came back early. To, er, show you."

The Hobbit winced. That was absolutely horrible. Why was it that he could be relatively eloquent when facing Gollum or Smaug but he could not even string together a proper sentence in front of Thorin? He swallowed heavily and tried again, "Mister Haldan gave it to me. I-I've been look at these images to try and figure out what they meant –"

"Is that the only reason?"

Bilbo paused at the calm and neutral way Thorin had posed that question. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, a bit taken aback.

"Is that the only reason that you were staring?" Thorin repeated. This time, his tone was low, bitter and mocking. "Is that the only reason why you were mesmerized to the point of not noticing that I was right behind you, even after I called out your name three times?"

The automatic 'yes' was at the tip of his tongue but a spark of irritation held Bilbo back. Who was Thorin to be challenging his response in such a mocking manner? Also, what did Thorin expect him to say? Of course he would give an answer that would best preserve the peace between them, even if it meant he had to distort the truth a bit. It wasn't any easier on Bilbo, who had to scramble to hide the heart that he has on his sleeve.

Why can't the Dwarf be happy with the answer that was given and instead, why must he insist on poking at the hornet's nest?

Fine, Bilbo thought, resigned. He was hurt, angry and just plain tired, and in that moment, he wanted nothing but to be out of this terrible situation so that he may crawl under his covers and sleep for a week. *If he wanted the truth so badly, he could have it*.

Bilbo returned Thorin's challenging glare, brought his chin up and gritted out, "No."

Thorin pushed his chair aside and stalked towards him in three fluid strides. Bilbo automatically backed into the last bit of space that was available to him, his back now digging painfully into the edge of the desk. Belatedly, Bilbo realized that Thorin had him trapped.

"Then pray tell, Master Hobbit, what other reasons do you have?" Thorin whispered. He was staring at Bilbo with a dark, intense hunger that he was not familiar with and it sent shivers running down the Hobbit's spine.

"I just," Bilbo stammered, unsure of how to continue. He wanted to have everything that was in that image. He wanted to be kissed, he wanted to be touched, he wanted not to be alone, he wanted to be happy, he wanted to be loved.

He wanted Thorin.

"I just *wanted*," Bilbo breathed out brokenly, desperately, and wishing that Thorin could finally *understand*.

"Bilbo," Thorin murmured, anger seemingly drained away at the confession. Bilbo closed his eyes and steeled his resolve for rejection.

Instead, Thorin leaned into the last couple of inches to capture the Hobbit's lips.

Bilbo exhaled, sharp and shaky. For all of Thorin's strength, Bilbo would have never imagined that he could kiss so gently, so softly. His lips brushed lightly against Bilbo's, leaving the barest warm pressure behind, as if he was afraid that the Hobbit will shatter if he pressed forward any more. The mere thought was enough to spark the growing feelings of *need* and *want* within Bilbo's chest, and with his mind made up, Bilbo reached up so that both of his hands were caressing the side of Thorin's face. Slowly, he angled his head to deepen the kiss, swiping his tongue invitingly over Thorin's closed lips.

The deep shuddering groan that Bilbo received in response sent a delicious thrill of satisfaction through him, and all at once, the kiss went from soft and chaste to being hungry, desperate and urgent. Thorin's arms wound their way tight around Bilbo, dropping the pamphlet uncaringly to the floor as his hands spread possessively across the span of his back to press the Hobbit even closer. Bilbo instinctively arched into the kiss, enjoying the intimate slide of his tongue against Thorin's while he basked in the feeling of the King's solid chest against his own. His hands moved so that one could card through the Dwarf's hair, while the other could slide down his neck to clutch at his broad shoulder. Bilbo felt like he would be perfectly content if he could spend eternity within Thorin's hold, surrounded by the familiar scent of sandalwood and metal that he had come to associate with his Dwarven King. For the first time in a long while, Bilbo felt protected, warm, and very much wanted.

In an amount of time that Bilbo believed was entirely way too short, Thorin pulled out of the kiss, leaving the two panting for breath. Bilbo opened his eyes to stare dazedly back, blinking owlishly at the Dwarf. Thorin looked utterly

wrecked, his pupils were blown wide with barely the ring of hazel showing, his lips was kiss-chapped and red, and his hair was dishevelled.

He was also sporting the world's largest grin as if he had just won the world's greatest prize.

"Bilbo," Thorin said, breathlessly and a bit disbelievingly. He leaned forward to rain small kisses against the corner of the Hobbit's mouth, his smooth cheek and down the length of his pale neck. Bilbo whimpered and shivered in place, unable to do anything else besides tilting his head to grant the Dwarf more access. "I have wanted this for so long," Thorin confessed, his breath and his beard tickling against soft, warm skin as his hands moved to rest comfortably over Bilbo's hips, "I was waiting for the opportune time to tell you, but I always find myself at a loss for words."

Bilbo chuckled and he tightened his arms around Thorin. The sheer relief that was crashing through him made him feel heady. "And here I thought you weren't interested in me at all."

Thorin straightened up so that he may press his forehead against Bilbo's, an intimate gesture that the Hobbit remembered them sharing some few months back. "It seems like we make quite the pair," the Dwarven King said, full of wry exasperation and Bilbo had to choke back his laugh that was bubbling up his throat.

Instead, he rolled his eyes and snorted. "Eru help us two oblivious idiots."

Bilbo let himself be pulled into a second, a third and many more slow, languid kisses, his mouth parting against Thorin's in a sense of new found familiarity that he was quickly becoming attached to.

There wasn't much talking to be done for the rest of the evening.

From his experiences as a professional thief, smuggler, hustler, and spy, Nori had learned very quickly to depend on not only his fine-tuned senses to keep himself alive, but also to listen to his gut instinct that something bad was going to happen.

That very gut instinct had been sending him warning signals since he had received an order from the King to meet at the royal tent. It was practically screaming at him to run far, far away, now that he had settled himself comfortably on a chair beside the other restless Company members.

"Does anyone know why we've been called here?" Nori heard Bombur ask his brother a few seats away. "And has anyone seen Bilbo and Ori?"

"Master Ori and Master Baggins will be late. They are currently still at the farm," Thorin answered as he strolled into the tent, his arms laden with scrolls. He beelined straight for his desk, and unceremoniously deposited the pile on the table surface without a care to the mess that he made. His presence immediately silenced the room. "We shall have to start the meeting without them."

Nori shifted uneasily and his gaze flickered to the closest exit. Why did he have such a bad feeling about this?

"Dwarves," Thorin called out in his usual, brusque manner once he had taken his seat. "It has come to my attention that there are stories being spread around the camp, stories involving Bilbo and I in a romantic relationship."

Almost immediately, every Dwarf in the room tensed at the statement but surprisingly, nobody gave away any tells beyond that. Nori would have appreciated his friends' surprisingly good poker faces if he wasn't so busy trying to discretely nudge his seat closer to the tent's only exit.

Thorin continued as if he had not noticed the sudden change in atmosphere. "Normally, I would dismiss these stories as harmless gossiping between the Dwarves, and I was happy to do just that until I have come to possess this interesting item."

The King pulled out a crumbled but *very* familiar looking piece of rectangular paper.

Oh no, Nori thought with a sinking feeling in his stomach that everyone else was no doubt experiencing, *he knows.*

"I have seen one of these pamphlets before a couple of months back, but its content was nowhere as…ah, creative as this one." Thorin flipped open to the first page, displaying the image of the King and Hobbit getting married at an altar. He looked at it briefly before turning back to the mortified Company members with his brows raised.

"Interesting choice of armour that I have on and I am rather fond of the flower crown on Bilbo's head. I wonder whose brilliant idea that was," he said lightly. Somewhere in the back of the room, Dori whimpered. He was the one who used his vast knowledge in floriography to help Ori in selecting the proper flowers that went into the crown.

"Oh, and let's not forget this gem over here," Thorin continued a bit too gleefully. The vindictive bastard was probably enjoying watching his friends squirm. He flipped to the second image – the one where the King and the Hobbit were fighting a great, big, ferocious creature – and held it up for everyone in the room to see. "Bilbo specifically wanted to give thanks to the author of this piece for giving him, and I quote, 'super heroic powers at wielding any sort of weaponry,' although he was certain that he would likely impale himself on anything heavier than Sting." Thorin added with a smirk, "Whoever wrote this piece was also extremely fond of mentioning my 'majestic handsomeness'. This term was used nineteen times within the short story. I counted."

Fíli and Kíli sank deeper and deeper into their chairs, their faces flushed bright red. They were desperately looking at the floor, probably wishing for a place where they could crawl to so that they could die in embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Nori and Bofur shared a mutual look of deep seated fear. They were next.

"And finally, I have this –"

"Your Majesty!" Dáin called out urgently from the entrance and before Thorin could respond, he stormed into the tent. "There has been an incident!"

The Dwarf Lord's eyes were wide with panic and he immediately thrust a piece of torn, parchment paper into Thorin's hands.

"I received a ransom note, and it came with these items." Lying in Dáin's open palm were a gold button inscribed with the initials B.B and a single, unravelling braid of brown hair plaited with a piece of purple ribbon.

"Master Baggins and Master Ori were taken."

Notes:

AUTHOR'S NOTES! 'Cause that's exactly what you want to be reading after ploughing through this chapter! :D

As always, many many many thanks to all of you for your patience, even when this chapter took like 3 weeks to be released. Sorry about that! I've got some RL issues that needed to be taken care of! I anticipate the next chapter to be a bit slow as well so apologies in advance! As always, thank you for taking the time to read, comment, subscribe, like, kudos, rec…you name it! I try to get back to all the comments that people leave me unless you left it as an anon on ffnet. There's no way for me to respond in that case, but rest assured, I read what you had to say.

[1] Credit goes to elenorasweet on AO3 who suggested (in Chapter 7's comment) in using Aule and Yavanna to further justify Bilbo and Thorin's marriage. I only wish that I could fit more than a fraction of elenorasweet's wonderful headcanon. To those who are interested to read what she wrote, here's the url: http://archiveofourown.org/comments/3094847

[2] Klamath weed, more widely known as the St. John's wort, is a mild herb commonly used to relieve muscle pain, anxiety and depression.

[3] I finally got to lay down several cards that I've been keeping a secret - the pamphlet's discovery, Bilbo and Thorin finally figuring shit out, and the kidnapping. The latter has been waiting in the backburner since Chapter 1 so I'm really glad that it's finally out in the open.

Please let me know if I'm forgetting to credit people to those I've commented/had conversations with re: this story! I want to make sure that everyone gets thanked properly! :D

Hold on to your pants. There's only the last chapter that remains!

Chapter 10 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1748026)

Notes:

So...remember that time when I said that Chapter 10 will be the last chapter? Well, that was a massive gross overestimation in my ability to cram all the necessary details in as little words as possible. Clearly, I'm not to be trusted with writing short chapters and Chapter 10 ended up so massive that I'm splitting it into 2 parts. So, here's Part 1. Part 2 will be posted as Chapter 11.

Thank you so much for your patience! Special thanks to: cicerothewriter and hoshiyaquilla for all of their wonderful help with editing and feedback, darthstitch for writing her lovely collection of fics inspired by this one (do check them out, they're hilarious!) (https://archiveofourown.org/series/50656) , feignedsobriquet for more very lovely art (featuring everyone's favourite hell raisers – Fili and Kili) (https://archiveofourown.org/works/866856/chapters/1666235) , and hattedhedgehog for her brilliant mini-web comics that centre around the disastrous events of Dwalin/Ori from Chapters 6 and 9, illustrated in Parts 1, 2, and 3 (https://hattedhedgehog.tumblr.com/post/56028892657/inspired-a-scene-in-chapter-6-of-the-inevitable) .

Betaed by toraberushimeri

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_10_endnotes) .)

Part. XIV The Captors

The first thing that Bilbo realized upon waking up, aside from the overwhelming feeling like death warmed over, was the pungent smell of damp mildew around him and the echoing sound of angry shouting.

"We should not have taken the Dwarf! That was not part of the plan!"

"Sod the plan! The plan already went to complete and utter shit when you lot stupidly decided to push it ahead of schedule!"

"If you did your job properly and got the Halfling alone like you were supposed to do, we wouldn't have had to take the Dwarf to begin with!"

"Oy! You tried peeling that stubborn pissant away from the Halfling! Besides, we were attacked!"

"He was half your size, you arse-faced idiot! Now, we're all in this bloody mess no thanks to you."

"Well, what are we going to do now? We can't just *keep* him! I say we kill him and be done with it."

"*Kill* him? Are you mad? I did not sign up to murder anyone!"

Bilbo pressed his lips together to muffle an involuntary groan as the noise fed into his pounding headache, threatening to overwhelm his senses in a red haze of agony. The bed of sharp, jagged stones that he was laying on did not help alleviate the ache in his body either. Reflexively, he shifted to get himself into a more comfortable position but his bound arms caught him by surprise. With a pained grunt, Bilbo flopped ungracefully back to the ground and the pebbles around him scattered loudly across the stone floor. The conversation in the room abruptly died.

"Would you look at that? The Halfling is finally awake! Quick, someone get our esteemed leader."

What is going on and where am I? Bilbo thought groggily at the sound of retreating footsteps. Panicked, he struggled to regain his senses and he snapped his eyes opened, only to immediately regret his decision when the bright daylight assaulted his vision. A sharp spike of pain ripped through his head, the agony threatening to send him reeling back into unconsciousness.

Alright, that was a stupid idea. Let's not try that again. Bilbo closed his eyes with a hiss and he concentrated on taking deep, steady breaths, battling to stay awake. He did not even notice the new arrival until the stranger stood less than a foot away from his curled form.

"Mister Baggins! My apologies for the rough treatment," a familiar voice – possibly the leader's if Bilbo were to hazard a guess – called out. He sounded strangely muffled as if he was speaking underwater. "It is unfortunate that we are in this current predicament, but please know that I have nothing personal against you at all."

In a last ditch attempt at defiance, Bilbo mustered the last of his dwindling energy to squint up at his assailant.

Haldan smiled back at him with cold, hard eyes. "This is just business and you, Mister Baggins, are worth *a lot* of money. I hope you understand."

Bilbo's vision faded to black before he could hear the rest of what Haldan had to say.

The room was immediately in an uproar at Dáin's grim announcement.

"A ransom? Who would do such a vile thing?!"

"Why would they take Bilbo and Ori? They have the gentlest temperament out of all of us!"

"Maybe because they are so polite and pleasant that the kidnappers thought that they make soft, easy targets."

"As if any member of Thorin Oakenshield's Company would be soft after all that we had to face!"

"Master Dori? Master Dori?" Balin's alarm could be heard above the agitated cries of the room. Bombur and Bifur, who were milling nearby, turned towards the rapidly paling Dwarf in question and together with Balin, they gently guided him back into his seat. "Deep breaths Master Dori," Balin coaxed, "Keep taking deep breaths."

On the other side of the room, Nori desperately pushed his way through the throng of Dwarves to get to Dáin and Thorin. "Let me through," he snarled as the others skirted away from his war path. *This must be some kind of a sick, twisted joke,* Nori balled up his fists and thought angrily. *How dare anyone, let alone Dáin of all people, tell such blatant lies to the Company!*

It wasn't until he had finally seen the braid and that damnably familiar purple ribbon – *a present from their late mother, Ori treasured that thing* – being handed to Thorin that Nori felt his breath knocked from his body; all the conflicting, violent emotions drained away in an instant, leaving him to stand shock still. His treacherous mind was flooded with horrible scenarios of his baby brother, sweet *gentle* Ori, left beaten and bleeding somewhere in the dark and there was absolutely nothing he could do to make this stop.

"They cut off his braid," he croaked out hollowly instead. "Why would they cut off his braid?"

The braid and the golden button served as a friendly warning, a dark, sinister part of Nori's mind, one that was more than familiar with the way kidnappers think, whispered to him. It sent chills running down the Dwarf's spine. *The next package received would be a thousand times worse and a thousand times more bloody.*

A steady hand on Nori's shoulders jostled him out of his dark musing. "Master Nori," Bofur's brows were drawn gravely and Nori wondered how the miner could remain so composed when he felt shaken to the core, "we will find your little brother and Bilbo."

The thief swallowed hard and nodded mechanically, but he couldn't find it in him to be so blindly optimistic. Bofur apparently could sense Nori's hesitation. At the thief's lacklustre reaction, he frowned even deeper and tightened his grip on the Dwarf.

Meanwhile, Dwalin had violently stalked forward to get to Thorin without caring that he had knocked his chair over. He stopped when he reached beside Nori and ever so slowly, he unsheathed Grasper and Keeper. "What does that letter say," he hissed, the quiet murder in his voice so cold that all those who heard him shivered, "who do I have to *eviscerate* for laying a hand on my intended and on our Hobbit?"

"A group, if what this letter says is the truth," Thorin looked up from the letter to reply coolly. His blasé attitude would have been convincing if not for the white knuckled grip on the page. "They want 14,000 gold coins, divvied up into five portions to be delivered in three days' time and dropped off in a location that they have specified."

"Specified?"

"They have drawn a map."

"Idiots," Glóin brandished his axe and laughed derisively. "All we have to do is ambush them when they collect the gold!"

The Dwarves answered with a resounding, enthusiastic 'Aye' and without further ado, they gleefully followed Glóin and Dwalin's example and unsheathed their weapons at once.

"Dwarves, let's not be too hasty! If we can all just put those away," Dáin yelled over the bloodthirsty crowd. His words went unheeded.

"We will make an example out of them! Show the rest of the world just what happens to those who harm one of our own!"

"Like young Ori had once said, we'll give them a taste of Dwarfish iron right up their jacksies!"

"Please, if we can all just settle down and carefully rationalize –"

"I have my crossbows! I have been practising on how to double wield them!"

"My Prince, I must really object to this unorthodox use – Please put those away!"

"SILENCE!" Thorin slammed his hand against his desk and roared, and in an instant, blessed silence filled the room once again. "An ambush would not work," the King began testily. He glared at his sheepish companions, "The kidnappers have already anticipated this. In the letter, they said that they will only release the hostages once they have safely retrieved the gold. If the kidnappers are harmed in the meantime, Bilbo and Ori will automatically forfeit their lives."

Thorin held up his hand to pre-emptively stop the grumblings. He continued authoritatively, "We will *not* give them any incentive to harm those two. My decision is final on this."

He did not break his eye contact from his Dwarves, especially from a growling, homicidal-looking Dwalin who was still clutching Grasper and Keeper, until *everyone* had nodded sullenly in acquiesce. Satisfied that he had driven his point home, he turned to his skittish cousin and asked gravely, "Where did you find this letter?"

Dáin's lips were pressed into a tight line, his face adopting a pinched look from what was undoubtedly an extremely unpleasant memory. "It was found on Master Borin, your Highness. It was placed deliberately there to –"

"Placed deliberately?" Nori scoffed in disbelief. He glared coldly at the Iron Hills Lord and spat out, "It is no secret that your advisors do not like Bilbo. And now you're telling me that you have conveniently found a note on Master Borin. What's to say that they were not the ones who were responsible for this?"

"Because, Master Nori," Dáin answered flatly, "the note was pinned to Master Borin's shirt across his chest, while Master Borin himself was found lying unconscious in a pool of his own blood. Whoever wanted our attention made sure they got it." Pursing his lips, he brusquely turned to Thorin. "Master Frór and I were the ones who found him. I have Frór watching over him at the moment. Master Borin sustained a knife wound to his side and a blow to the back of his head. Thankfully, it was nothing life threatening. Now if you are all ready," Dáin eyed the shocked crew tersely, "I can take you to him. Hopefully he is awake to answer our questions."

The second time that Bilbo woke up, he was bombarded by two different sensations; the first and immediate one was an all-consuming pain that seemed to be radiating somewhere from the back of his skull. Bilbo suspected that if he had the strength to lift his arms, he would have found a swollen bump there as a telltale sign of his injury. The second thing that Bilbo noticed, once he had pushed away the feeling of pain, was the pervasive chill of damp wooden planks pressing uncomfortably against his cheek. That in itself was highly unusual since the last thing he remembered was strolling beside Ori on his way back to Thorin's tent –

A wave of disorienting memories came crashing back at him.

Farm. Attack. Kidnapping.

Haldan.

It took every last ounce of effort for Bilbo not to visibly react at the deep seated feeling of betrayal that flared up within him. His friend had orchestrated his kidnapping! How long had Haldan been planning this? Had it always been Haldan's intention to trick Bilbo into becoming friends so that he would lower his guard around the other advisor? Was Bard in on this scheme as well?

Bilbo clamped down on his anger. The answers could wait. For now he needed to focus on surveying his immediate surroundings.

Keeping himself loose-limbed to feign unconsciousness, Bilbo breathed in deeply, registering the utter stillness of the room and the cloying scent of musk from the stale air around him. The quietness of the space reminded him of Erebor before its resurrection. Bilbo remembered the first time that he explored the derelict fortress; his diminutive form had cast a long shadow over the once gilded walls while his steps echoed hollowly in the abandoned rooms with every new step he took. The utter feeling of loneliness had pressed heavily against Bilbo from all around him, making him feel small and insignificant in the vast, open space. There was something horribly sad to see such splendour reduced to ashes and dust.

Well, Bilbo thought glumly, opening his eyes to his surroundings at last, *I much prefer to be over there than here, wherever here is.*

Bilbo waited until he was certain that he had regained enough of his senses before wriggling his arms behind him. The tight tug around his numbing wrists was to be expected, and logically Bilbo had to admit that it would be a gross oversight if his captors did not keep him bound, but he could not help but feel slightly disappointed to discover his hands tied. Carefully adjusting his weight, he struggled clumsily into a sitting position, only flopping to his side twice for his trouble. He squinted around in hopes that he could recognize something, anything that could give away where he was.

From what Bilbo could tell, he was in a small, rectangular room completely devoid of furniture and light, save for a weak beam of sunlight that shone through a tiny circular window far above Bilbo's reach. The dark, weathered wood beneath him looked like it had seen better days. Broken, jagged pieces of the floor planks jutted out randomly across the span of the room with all manners of detritus caught between the cracks and holes of the floorboards. The walls were in an equally sad state of affairs. The half-rotting wooden panels that were held in place by rusting, protruding nails that looked like they were seconds away from collapsing inwards. Outside, the wind howled and Bilbo shivered at the cold that seeped through.

Wait, shivered?

Bilbo quickly looked down and felt instantly relieved that his green jacket was still on his body, although it was gaping wide open from the lack of buttons. He sighed in resignation. Honestly, how was it that he had such bad luck with keeping his buttons? He had rather liked those too! They were beautifully made and, Bilbo suspected, handcrafted by Thorin himself, which made losing them all the more regretful. At this rate, he might as well just give up on buttons altogether and go around wearing something like his old bathrobe.

The resounding clank of the metal lock sliding open caught Bilbo completely off guard, and he reflexively shifted his attention towards the room's entrance. The door creaked open, and in came Haldan, carrying a wooden tray with food. The sheepish smile that he gave to Bilbo was a familiar one, and the Hobbit automatically prepared himself to brush away the stream of apologies that would undoubtedly come pouring out of Haldan. Then, he remembered that he was in this predicament *because* of that lying backstabber, and the anger came roaring back.

"Mister Baggins! I am glad to see that you are awake! I was worried that we were too rough with you. My apologies for that," Haldan said, pausing briefly to kick the door shut behind him. "I have brought you some soup, some bread, and a pot of tea for us to share, although we will have to make do without milk and sugar, I'm afraid. Please enjoy the meal while it is still fresh and warm."

Bilbo threw the strongest glare that he could muster. "How kind of you to watch over my well being after you've kidnapped me," he uttered with venom.

Haldan rolled his eyes, and deposited the tray in front of the Hobbit. Instantly, the air of nervousness around him vanished. "Oh don't be so dramatic! I told you it wasn't personal. Besides, I'm hardly going to let you starve. You're worth more to me alive than dead. Now if you don't mind, please kindly turn around." When Bilbo did not budge at all, he sighed, "Unless you want to eat with your hands tied, that's fine by me as well."

Bilbo grudgingly turned so that his tied hands were facing Haldan. For a brief second, he entertained the thought of running to safety the moment he was freed.

Clearly anticipating Bilbo's train of thought, Haldan added in an exasperated manner, "Please do not try to run. Not only do I have a knife that I'm not afraid to use, I have guards posted outside your door, and I have your little friend with us as well. I'd hate to hurt him to get you to cooperate."

Bilbo would have spun around if Haldan's grip wasn't on his arm. "Little friend?" he asked, his heart sinking. *Please don't let it be Ori. Please don't let it be Ori.*

Haldan hummed and said distractedly, "Yes, the young Dwarf with his head constantly buried in a book. I like him, he's well-mannered!"

Oh, this was not good.

Bilbo turned to face his captor when the rope bindings were cut off. He absentmindedly rubbed the circulation back into his raw wrists. "Why take Ori? He hasn't done anything."

Haldan winced and rubbed the back of his neck. "Well...my men panicked when the kidnapping was taking too long. I admit, things could have gone much smoother, but we had to push our plans forward than what was initially scheduled so..." The advisor trailed off, still looking very much embarrassed. He lowered himself on a debris-free spot on the floor and he sat crossed legged. "Rest assured, he is safe and sound. Now please sit while I get this tea started."

Bewildered, Bilbo gingerly sat down as Haldan began pouring two cups of tea from the flowered porcelain pot that he had brought in. He was torn between following his Baggins sensibilities by thanking for the offered tea, because no respectable Hobbit refused a good cup of tea, and his Tookish sensibilities to tell Haldan just where he could stick that tea cup. Instead, he asked, "So you've had this elaborate plan to kidnap me for ransom but you had to do a rush job. Why, though?"

"Why what?" Haldan gently placed the pot to the side with a soft clink to look up inquisitively at Bilbo. "Why the kidnapping or why the rush?"

"Both, I suppose."

Haldan reached for his cup, and blew lightly to clear away the rising steam from his drink. "Well, Mister Baggins," he began, "to answer your second question first, we had to rush the plan when we learned that Gandalf the Grey was arriving. The last thing we want is a Wizard to interfere." He took a deep drink of his tea before continuing, "As for your first question, the answer requires a bit of time. You don't mind do you?"

Bilbo rolled his eyes and scoffed. "By all means, let's hear it. It's not like I have any places I need to be at the moment."

"Wonderful!" Haldan beamed, and somewhere in the back of Bilbo's mind, he was reeling at how surrealthis whole situation was. He was having tea and polite conversation with his *captor* of all people, and if Thorin knew about this, Eru forbid that he does, the Dwarf would probably scowl furiously like he had never scowled before in disapproval.

This has got to be the most bizarre kidnapping in the history of Middle-Earth.

"How much do you know about the Lake-town Master?" Haldan asked. He nudged the plate of food closer to Bilbo. "Come on now, eat up! I promise it isn't poisoned. See?" As a show of good faith, he pinched off a bit of bread, dipped it in the soup and ate it.

"He was a slimy git who ran away after Bard gave him the gold to rebuild Lake-town." Bilbo answered bluntly, eyeing the food with open suspicion. Why was Haldan doing this? Was it of some bizarre form of guilty penance? Or maybe, Haldan was bored out of his mind and Bilbo provided some entertainment. Bilbo wasn't sure which answer that he preferred.

"Well I'm hardly going to disagree with you on that!" Haldan laughed into his tea. "Yes, he was a git, and he ran away with a lot of gold although that was certainly not where my problems began. I suppose I should start from the beginning?"

Bilbo nodded slowly, and he reached for his soup, finally giving in to his Hobbitish love of food. He took a small bite out of it and noted, with bitterness, that it was potato and leek, his favourite. It was also absolutely delicious.

Damn you, Haldan, he thought viciously, scarfing down a much larger mouthful as he continued to glare poisonously at the man.

"My associates and I used to work for the Master," Haldan said, completely ignoring the animosity that was directed at him. "I was his accountant. It was the job that I have been striving to get, not because I particularly liked the Master, but I did like the sizeable income that came with the position. The money meant that my family and I could finally crawl from the gutters of poverty. Can you imagine what it is like to go so desperately hungry that you are on the verge of starvation, Mister Baggins?"

For an instant, Bilbo tensed, clutching at his the bowl and his spoon tightly until his hands were shaking. Cold-seated panic unfurled in his head along with the sharp, bitter memories of the Fell Winter. He was but a child at the time, and a rather sheltered one at that, but Bilbo doubt he could ever forget the thick blanket of fear that had smothered the Shire-folk as they watched their food storage dwindle down to nothing. Bilbo remembered the many hushed conversations that his parents had shared, made in secrecy when they thought he was not present. They grew more and more frequent and more and more panicked as the unforgiving winter stretched out, when not even the Baggins' wealth could save them from hunger, not when there was no food to be found anywhere. He remembered the strict rationing that his mother had carried out, and despite how tough things were at home, Bilbo's parents were insistent that their son would always have at least a

mouthful to eat. It wasn't until later when his father had fallen ill and Bilbo had seen how equally thin and gaunt his mother had become that he realized just from whom he was taking his food.

Bilbo may not have had to starve, but he understood what it was like all the same.

"I don't need to imagine," Bilbo said, his voice deceptively steady as he pushed away his half-empty bowl of soup. He swallowed the memories down along with the unpleasant, roiling emotions that came with them.

"I am sorry to hear that, Mister Baggins." Haldan looked at Bilbo with something akin to pity, and Bilbo felt another spike of irritation towards his captor. "However, I trust that you fully understand my determination to avoid sinking to that level again. I happily worked for the Master and the both of us came to a mutual agreement – I would be paid very handsomely for my work and in return, I would turn a blind eye to some of his, ah, less than honest dealings. Together with my associates, we became very rich, very fast."

That...did not surprise Bilbo. Having met the Master, he could imagine the detestable man to be involved in embezzlement.

"So, let me guess," Bilbo crossed his arms across his chest and said flatly, "you were finally discovered."

Haldan tilted his head in agreement, but he did not look upset by the accusation. "And the timing could not have been any worse. It was right after Smaug's attack and the people, well, what's left of them anyway, were hoping to use the town's fund to rebuild their homes. However, they discovered a *significantly* less amount of money saved up for the town than what was reported. It seemed that the Master has gotten a bit too greedy and has pinched off more money than he should have. To say that the Master and all those who worked for him were heavily criticized was…a severe understatement."

Things were starting to piece together for Bilbo, and he blurted out, "Is that why the Master was so insistent with pressing Thorin for money before the Battle? To give it back to the people to save his own skin?"

"Partially," Haldan looked very pleased at Bilbo's leap of logic, "the townsmen were threatening all of our lives at that point and we, in turn, were threatening to redistribute the Master's assets to appease the masses. You can imagine that he was under quite the pressure to procure the necessary funds to quell this situation and thought it best to acquire said fund through Thorin. I also had no doubt that he was hoping to pocket some of the newly earned gold for himself."

"Of course he was." Bilbo rolled his eyes while absentmindedly reaching for his cup of tea. For a kidnapping, this whole endeavour sure was becoming much more comfortable than he had expected. "He received his gold from King Bard after the negotiation with Thorin. It should be more than enough to get the townsfolk off of his back."

"Yes, he did, but it was much too late by that time. There was so much anger towards the Master that there wasn't much that he could do to salvage this situation." Haldan grimaced in distaste. "Even then, King Bard insisted on giving the Master the gold out of some naive hope that the Master could use it to redeem himself. Once a loyal guard to the Master, forever a loyal guard, it would seem."

"And where were you and your associates when this was happening? How did you escape the townsmen's wrath and land yourself as Bard's advisor?"

Haldan smiled. "Oh, don't be mistaken, Mister Baggins, there was no escaping the townsmen, not when they have their torches and pitchforks ready. As far as they were concerned, my associates and I were just as guilty so the best that we could do at the time was to keep our heads down and out of sight." Haldan pressed two fingers against his mug, and frowned when it was too hot for his liking. He continued, "It just so happened that I was the more fortunate one out of the group. I was approached by King Bard himself who was seeking an expert in dealing with finances and he was hoping that I could work for him. Best of all, the King promised to protect me if I accepted." Haldan tilted his head back and laughed, "It was an offer that was impossible to refuse."

"But King Bard must have known about your involvement with the Master. No offense, but couldn't he have picked someone with a reputation for being more trustworthy?" Bilbo pressed on, absorbed with finding the truth. And to think, there was so much hidden beneath Haldan's nervous, jittery façade. He wondered how many people had equally underestimated the man like he himself had done.

"No offense taken!" Haldan said wryly. "To be honest, I was just as surprised as you were at being approached. I suspect it was because I was the only one who was still alive that had the necessary accounting skills." He chuckled darkly, "By chance, I was promoted from a disgraced accountant to a hated advisor. Funny how everyone else's loss ended up to be my gain."

He sighed in disappointment at the disgusted look that Bilbo threw at him. "And this is where you and I are fundamentally different, Mister Baggins. I am an opportunist who will always put my own self in front of everything. You, on the other hand, are bogged down by this need to please everyone."

He propped his chin up with his fist, and leaned forward, squinting at Bilbo as if he was observing some bizarre creature. "It must be so exhausting having to constantly do good by *everybody*. I still can't quite figure out if you are being

exceptionally brave or stupid for undertaking such an impossible task." Haldan eyed Bilbo up and down quickly, and said, his voice suddenly chilly, "At the moment, my opinion is leaning more towards 'stupid'."

Bilbo swallowed heavily at Haldan's sudden change in demeanour. So, *this* was what Haldan had been hiding all along, this steel core of ruthlessness that, by his own admission, pushed him to place his own well-being above all else. Worse still, Haldan seemed to pride himself in his unwavering conviction to serve his own interests. Bilbo wondered just how far Haldan will go to achieve this. Would he risk burning every single bridge of his past?

Putting on a nonchalant face, the Hobbit said with false bravado, "Why does it matter if I'm being stupid or not? You just need me for the money." He paused to take a small sip of tea to further disguise how much his discovery had disturbed him. "Speaking of which, you haven't finished your explanation. Why do you need the money?"

And just like that, Haldan was back to his sunny self. "Oh, pardon me! Where was I?" He crossed his arms, and stared at the floor for a few seconds until his line of thought came back. "Ah yes, I became King Bard's newest advisor and believe it or not, I wanted to do a good job. I had much to gain by retaining my position and I suppose that I wanted to redeem myself, at least a little. However, I quickly realized that my efforts were made into a mockery by just about everyone."

"I'm not sure if I have mentioned this, Mister Baggins, but I am *rather* good with numbers and figures." He shot a challenging look at Bilbo, but was immediately pacified when the Hobbit nodded along passively. "From the very beginning, I have discussed with the King how best to spend his money. I have submitted costs projections and endless pages of reports to warn him about overspending but despite my best efforts, my warnings were brushed aside by the King's other advisors who, I should add, know *nothing* about finances. You see, it was a personal vendetta that they had against me. They were not happy with my presence, and had made it their mission to remove me from my post."

Haldan's voice was low and dangerous when he hissed out, "And the King, that stupid, *biddable* man, followed their advice, despite the fact that he had hired me for my expertise. Time and time again, I tried to speak to him but he *wouldn't listen*."

Bilbo wisely refrained from making any comments, and took a silent sip of his tea.

"Did you know, Mister Baggins," Haldan continued, and there was no disguising his open bitterness, "that Dale's current funds are absolutely pitiful? When I brought this up in a meeting, they had the audacity to pin the blame on me!" Haldan gestured to himself violently. "You're the financial advisor, they exclaimed. Why haven't you warned us? How did you let this happen? What do we need you for if you can't even do what you're hired to do?"

"And then, the rumours started to spread – Haldan must be up to his old tricks again! He is embezzling from the King just like he and the previous Master had embezzled from Lake-town! Why was he hired anyway? Clearly, he must be infecting the King with his poison! Quickly, someone have him removed before he could do more damage! Jail is too good for someone like him, he should be stoned, no, *hanged* for his crimes!" Bilbo flinched back as Haldan sounded more and more unhinged. "And that's when I realized that nothing has changed. With the Master gone, I have become the town's scapegoat, and it is only a matter of time before I will end up murdered. King Bard's promise for protection was nothing but useless words offered by a powerless man. I might as well take a page out of the Master's book and save myself!"

There was a moment of uncomfortable, tense silence. Sometime during that rant, Bilbo had leaned away from Haldan, clutching his mug over his chest like he was wielding a shield. As the man took a few deep breaths to reign in his rage, Bilbo slowly forced himself to lower his mug. "Why bring Erebor into this mess? Wouldn't it have been easier for you to take directly from King Bard?" he asked hesitantly.

Haldan scoffed, but Bilbo was relieved to note that his posture had relaxed slightly. "I was originally going to steal from King Bard," he admitted, "but the pitiful amount that he has left will not be able to sustain me unless I want to start my new life as a pitiful, starving pauper. The only one with any gold around here is King Thorin, so I wasn't given much of a choice to choose from."

"And kidnapping was your answer?"

"It was a quick, effective way of getting what you want if you have nothing left to lose, and I'm not sure if you've noticed, Mister Baggins, but I have nothing left to lose." Haldan shrugged, reaching for his mug beside him and draining the rest of the liquid in a smooth motion. "By that time, I have gathered my associates, and they were also willing to do what it took to get out of here. It was easier to carry out a plan that took more risks with a team assembled, especially when the reward was a great one."

Bilbo was about to retort when a loud crash resounded from outside of the door followed by the sound of muffled cursing.

"Ah, it seems that your friend is finally awake!" Haldan calmly placed his empty mug back on the wooden tray. He turned towards the door, and called out, "Let him in!"

A large blond and furious-looking man with blood streaming down his chin (*from his purpling, swollen nose,* Bilbo noted in shock) came lumbering in. He was carrying a violently thrashing Ori under one of his arms as if he was lugging

around a sack of potatoes.

"Let me go, you great, ugly, troll-shagging, scum-sucking son of a whore! Once I get my hands on you, oh you're going to be sorry! You're going to wish that I only left you with a broken nose, you – "

"Not so polite anymore, this friend of yours," Haldan idly commented as a string of increasingly creative profanities came pouring out of Ori. "Just leave him here somewhere – gently please!" he insisted when the large man looked like he was getting ready to throw Ori across the room.

Instead, he gave Haldan a foul glare, unceremoniously dumped Ori face-down on the ground, and backed away to stand guard beside the entrance with an annoyed grunt.

"Ori!" Bilbo shouted in distress, immediately clamouring to his friend.

"Bilbo?" Ori quickly lifted his head in Bilbo's direction. "Bilbo! Are you alright? Are you hurt?" he struggled to roll himself around with renewed determination despite his bound arms and legs.

"I'm fine, I'm…fine," Bilbo grabbed his friend by the shoulder, and helped him sit up while checking for injuries that needed binding. The sight of dried blood caked along the side of Ori's face made Bilbo worry in particular. Frowning, he gingerly pushed away the Dwarf's blood soaked fringe to get a clearer view of the injury, careful to avoid brushing against any broken skin. He winced at the nasty gash that was revealed.

"Oh dear, perhaps we have been a bit too rough with your companion as well." Haldan said apologetically. "I suppose that some damages cannot be avoided though." He tilted his head at Ori, and greeted happily, "Hello there! Good to see you again!"

"You!" Ori sputtered, his face frozen in shock for a brief second before contorting in a livid mixture of pain, hate and fury. Bilbo had to hold Ori down from charging angrily at the man despite the fact that the Dwarf was still bound.

"Yes, yes me. And here I thought Mister Baggins was overreacting when he woke up. Master Dwarf, you certainly have got him beat." Haldan huffed out, bemused but unimpressed by the display of aggression. The large man behind him cracked his knuckles menacingly.

When no other answers were forthcoming from either Bilbo or Ori, Haldan got up and stretched his back, the joints of his spine popping unpleasantly. Bilbo felt a thrill of petty satisfaction in knowing that sitting on the floor had left the man just as uncomfortable as he was. "Well then, that certainly was interesting!" Haldan brushed the dust from his tunic with both of his hands. "As much as I would like to stay, I'm afraid I must be off! Lots of things left to plot. I'm sure you understand." Haldan sent a quick signal with the flick of his wrist, and the large man moved forward to pick up the tray and the discarded dishware. "I will have someone bring another meal for your friend shortly. Have a pleasant night, gentlemen."

"Wait!" Bilbo called to his retreating back. He had one final question left to ask. "Why are you doing all this – the tea, the conversation?"

Haldan paused but he did not turn to face Bilbo. "I figured that at the very least I could spare to tell you the truth. Consider it repayment for the kindness you have shown me." With those parting words, he walked out of the room, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Aye, your Majesty! I was attacked by four Men just by the outskirts of the camp! It was completely unprovoked! If I find out who those honourless, cowardly weasels are, I'll have their beards, every last one of them!"

Frór placed a placating hand on Borin's shoulder, and gently pushed the incensed Dwarf back on to his cot. "Rest, friend," he muttered, ignoring Borin's grumbling.

"Can you recall any of their faces?" Thorin asked from the other side of the narrow bed, a bit too brusquely if Balin's warning look was anything to judge by. Honestly, he could care less what he sounded like at the moment so long as Borin gave him the answers that he needed. "We will also need you to recount the events prior and during the attack."

"Nay, your Majesty, I cannot recall what their faces looked like." Borin shook his head apologetically. He immediately winced, lifting one of his hands to his head to gingerly prod against the thick swath of bandages wrapped there. "They were dressed as all the other workers would: thick, non-descript tunic, brown pants, worn leather boots, and gloves. They were also wearing their hoods up and they covered their faces with their scarves. However, I did notice that the one who stabbed me was a very large man, taller and stouter than King Bard. There was also a very small man in the group, real thin and bony looking."

"One large man, two medium sized ones, and a very small one. That's not much to go by." Balin sighed, shifting closer to his King in a show of support. Thorin distantly realized that the tension rolling off of his shoulders must have been obvious to everyone in the room, and he tried to force himself to relax. He needed to keep a cool head if he wanted any chance to save Bilbo and Ori. "Is there anything else that stood out about your attackers? Maybe a scar on the forehead or a birthmark somewhere that was uncovered?" Balin asked again.

“I’m afraid there is none, Master Balin,” Borin said regretfully. He stroked at his dark beard in thought. “They were careful to keep as much of their features as hidden as possible.”

Thorin tried not to let his frustration show.

“Everyone has gotten themselves comfortably settled, your Majesty,” Dáin announced as he walked in the room, drawing the Dwarves’ attention to him while inadvertently distracting Thorin from his increasingly angry thoughts. “Hopefully, the healers will feel less harassed now that everyone has gotten out of their way and peace has been restored to their tents.” He winked at a passerby healer, and gave him a small, sheepish wave. He was rewarded with a dirty look.

None of the healers were impressed when thirteen, panicked Dwarves came barging into their sanctuary with their loud, frantic demands to see Borin, and it was only through the presence of both the King and the Iron Hills Lord that they were not promptly booted off the premise. In the end, it was agreed that only the King, the Lord, and Balin were allowed in while the rest of the Company had to wait outside, where they would sit quietly and cease their disruptive behaviour at once, *thank you very much*!

“Have I missed anything important?” Dáin asked politely. He sidled beside Frór and bent over to greet Borin, pressing his forehead against his advisor's. “Old friend, I am glad to see that you are well,” the Lord said warmly, looking very much like a great weight had lifted off of his shoulders.

“It will take a lot more than a nick to the side and a blow to the head to keep this old Dwarf down,” Borin answered, his voice rough, but he was grinning widely back at Dáin.

Thorin swallowed, remembering the same fragile gesture that he had shared with Bilbo, and what it felt like to willingly surround himself in his warm embrace. He had never told Bilbo this, but in that moment it was as if the Hobbit had applied a salve over his heart, one that soothed away all the hurt and the coiling anger in his body, leaving behind a rare sense of quiet stillness that he thought he would never feel again after Frerin’s death. That same feeling of peace only came back to him when he had Bilbo pressed tightly against him, locked in a passionate kiss that neither of them wanted to end.

Thorin balled his fists, and made himself look away. He did not see Balin’s sad, understanding expression or the meaningful look he shared with Frór.

Clearing his throat delicately, Frór began in his characteristic unflappable manner, “Master Borin has been telling his Majesty that his attackers had gone to great lengths to keep themselves from being identified, and it was with utmost regret that he could not find any identifiable features on them save for their body size.” The Dwarf paused briefly to glance at Dáin, who was drawing away from Borin with one last, friendly clap to his shoulder. “Now that everyone is present, perhaps we should move on to discuss the events leading to the attack?”

Borin sighed, annoyed and tired by the memories of his attack. “It was my turn to work at the farm and knowing that the Hob – ” he caught the flash of irritation in Thorin’s eyes, and hastily corrected, “*Master Baggins* was working there as well, I was hoping to use this as an opportunity to approach him. I have just found out some distressing news about that Dale advisor that Master Baggins is so fond of, the one who calls himself Haldan, and I wanted to warn Master Baggins to stay away from him. I believe that the man is more dangerous than he seems.”

Borin looked around, and when he saw that no one had any questions, he continued quieter than before, “I found out that Haldan is nothing but a crook who worked with the Master to drain Lake-town dry of its riches. Now that it’s in ruins, Haldan has apparently moved on to a bigger, richer target: King Bard himself.”

“And what proof do you have that these rumours are true?” Thorin asked sceptically. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Who’s to say that these are not stories conjured out of jealousy to slander the good Master Haldan’s name?”

“These are no mere stories, your Majesty. Haldan worked for the Master for many years as his accountant and during that time, the Master had consistently pocketed a fair amount of the city’s gold. This was discovered by the townsmen when they were trying to see if they could afford to fix the damages done by Smaug.” Borin raised a questioning brow to Thorin, but his tone was in no way disrespectful when he added, “Who do you suppose helped the Master cover his tracks in the books, your Majesty?”

Thorin had to concede that Borin did have a point there.

Balin, however, was still unconvinced. He narrowed his eyes at Borin. “These are dangerous accusations that you are making, Master Borin,” he said gravely.

“And I trust my research and my sources to not lead me astray,” Borin responded confidently in turn. He met Balin’s measuring gaze without flinching.

“Gentlemen, please. We can discuss more about Haldan afterwards. For now, let us continue." Dáin gestured at Borin in a universal hand wave to encourage him to get on with. "You found out about Master Haldan, and you wanted to warn Master Baggins. What happened next?”

“It was only until after we have returned from Dale that I was able to run into Master Baggins. I was at the outskirts of the Dwarven camp, and I could see him walking with a young Dwarf some distance ahead of me. Before I could catch up

to him however, I saw four Men trailing suspiciously behind him."

Thorin sucked in a sharp breath at the disturbing picture that Borin's words had planted in his mind. How long has Bilbo been followed without him noticing? How long has Bilbo's safety been so horribly compromised? He cursed under his breath; he *knew* he should have not given in to Bilbo's request by dismissing his team of Dwarven bodyguards.

When I get him back, Thorin thought*,* because he was going to get Bilbo back safe and sound, no ifs and buts, *I am assigning at least twenty guards to Bilbo on top of the four who guard the bedroom's entrance.*

"Those men were your attackers?" Dáin asked, but the flat way he had said that made it sound like a foregone conclusion rather than a question. Borin nodded.

"I stopped them, of course, first asking if they were lost, then asking what business they have around this area, whom they were working for, what their jobs were, what was their schedule for the day, were they having a pleasant evening, how were they enjoying their walk, and whom did they say they were working for again?" Borin held his hand up, and he ticked his fingers off one by one as he listed out the questions he had asked. "Just employing the standard interrogation tactics to catch them off guard, really."

Frór crossed his arms and smiled, the corner of his mouth delicately quirking upwards in a gesture that was oozing with vindictive satisfaction. "I trust that you were successful?" he drawled out.

"Oh yes, they toppled like a house of cards. Couldn't keep their stories straight at all." Borin snorted. "In retrospect, that was where I made my mistake. I was so focused on catching them lying that I had failed to notice that I was very much alone at the time. Master Baggins and his friend had wandered out of sight."

"They all jumped on me at once. One of them managed to take a swipe at me with his knife, and the last thing I remembered was something smashing into the back of my head." Borin absentmindedly picked at the rough, white bandaging around his head. He ignored Frór's disapproving look. "I managed to land a good few punches to their legs and knees before I went down though. Not sure how much damage I actually dealt out, but I would like to believe that at least one of them would have some trouble hobbling around for the next few days."

Thorin mentally went through Borin's account again, committing to memory what little description he was given of the captors: Four men, possibly sporting some form of leg injury, one larger than King Bard, one small and thin, the other two are of average size.

Balin was right; there wasn't much to go after, but Thorin was persistent if nothing else, and he would continue searching to the ends of Middle-Earth if that was what it took to get his Bilbo back.

"Thank you, Master Borin, for your help." Thorin tilted his head lightly towards the bedridden Dwarf. "I will send Master Óin to look over your injuries. He is especially talented with creating salves that could treat all kinds of wounds. I am sure that under his expert care, you will be on your feet in no time." He brushed aside Borin's flustered refusal with a quiet but firm, "I insist, Master Borin," and with one last nod towards the Iron Hills advisors, Thorin left the tent, Balin and Dáin tight on his heels.

The moment he set foot outside, the Company members immediately jumped to their feet and clamoured to him.

"Well, what did he say?" Dwalin was the first one to call out impatiently. Among the cacophony of noise and movement, he was standing almost entirely too still with his hands inches away from the daggers that Thorin knew were sheathed in his belt. Thorin had only seen Dwalin like this whenever he was on the hunt out in the wild, and he remembered his friend describing what it felt like to be in that headspace. "It's like your whole world, everything that you see and hear, has been narrowed down so that you can only focus on your goal to catch your prey. Everything else that is unrelated is just muffled, background rubbish," the warrior had said, shrugging.

Thorin had yet to see Dwalin fail in his hunts whenever he set his mind to it. He almost felt bad for those kidnappers in that brief second. Almost.

"Master Borin could not see his attackers' faces, as they had disguised themselves well." Thorin admitted. The disappointment had not ebbed, not even after he had some time to digest this news. "What he could tell us was that there were four Men, dressed as everyday workers, who had attacked him. Within the group, there was one who was large and heavily built, more so that King Bard, and another member who was small and thin. Master Borin might have also wounded one or more of them in the leg."

"That's not a bad place to start actually," Nori grunted out from his spot beside Dori. His older brother was still looking paler than usual, and he was obviously leaning on Nori to keep himself standing, but Thorin was glad to note that the lost look of shock from earlier was fading.

At Nori's vague statement, everyone turned to the thief in surprise. When he noticed this, he elaborated impatiently, "The attackers looked like four workers from Dale or Lake-town. The only way they could have gotten into the camp was through the South Gate with all the other workers. On top of that, Dale and Lake-town workers tend to visit the camp for their routine supply drop-off and pick-up, and I know they operate on a different schedule from each other." He paused to

let that information sink in. "If we can narrow down the time that the attack took place, we can match it with the schedule and find out which town they are from."

"Master Borin saw them trailing after Master Baggins and Master Ori after he returned from the farm," Dáin did not hesitate to volunteer immediately.

"Bilbo and Ori were probably walking back to the King's tent for our six o'clock meeting, which meant the kidnapping had to be just before that time," Bofur called out helpfully from behind the two Ri brothers. He returned Nori's look of gratefulness with a bashful smile.

"After the attack, they must have used something to carry Master Baggins and Young Ori out as well," Glóin added. His words stirred a fresh bout of interested murmur from his friends. "A cart, a wheelbarrow, anything. That should help narrow down our search some more!"

"An injured worker leaving the camp at around six o'clock with a cart is much more obvious to find," Bombur concluded with flourish, earning him a clap to the shoulder from the Dwarves around him.

Thorin nodded at his trusted entourage, his mind racing as he decided what he should do next. Already, he was feeling a resurgence of hope that this situation was not as bleak as he had first believed. "Master Nori," he ordered, "see what you can find out about all the workers who visited the camp. The resources of Erebor are at your disposal. Take anyone and anything that you may find useful, but be discreet in your search. We do not want to alert the kidnappers that we are on their trail."

Nori bowed lightly to his king. "Thank you for the offer, but I work best alone, and I have everything I need on my person. I will need help with sorting out the information once I have them." With a final bow, he gently guided Dori to Bofur, who gladly accepted his position as Dori's newest crutch, and left after whispering quick reassurance to both Dwarves.

"I have made quite the network of friends from the betting pools that I have set up and I am supposed to meet with them in ten minutes. With your permission, I can ask them if they have spotted any visitors who fit Master Borin's description. They are more than happy to share any gossip," Glóin offered.

Thorin nodded, "Do so, but do not mention the kidnapping. After your meeting, return to my tent with the information you have collected. We will hopefully be able to coordinate with Nori to piece together something useful."

"We want to help as well!" Fíli moved to the front of the group with Kíli by his side, and they stared at their Uncle with twin looks of determination on their faces.

Thorin reached over to clasp a hand on both of his nephews' shoulders, and he wondered if there will ever be a day when he will cease to be proud of his boys. "I will need you to find Roäc at the Ravenhill. Have him send out all of his kin to survey the area around Dale and Lake-town for Bilbo and Ori. We can at least get an aerial search started. Let him know that for his help, I will gladly gift him a satchel of the brightest set of gold beads that he will ever lay his eyes on." They nodded solemnly, and dashed after Glóin's retreating back.

"Master Óin," Thorin called out, startling the Dwarf, "if you can be so kind as to look at Master Borin's injuries, I would be much obliged. I promised him that you could provide the proper healing salves to expedite his recovery."

"I most definitely can, your Majesty!" Óin puffed his chest out, looking supremely pleased by the king's high regard of his talents. "I shall get to it at once!"

There was a pause as Thorin considered how he should divide up the rest of his team while everyone eagerly waited for their set of orders. "I plan to ride to Dale to speak to King Bard," Thorin finally admitted, "but I cannot bring everyone with me, or else I will risk drawing too much attention to myself and the purpose of my visit. I am thinking of travelling with two other companions, no more than three."

"I am going with you," Dwalin growled out, his tone and hard gaze brook no argument. It wasn't as if Thorin was surprised by Dwalin's swift decision either. His friend was not one to sit idly by when there was a chance for him to be doing *something* to help, especially when there was so much at risk from failure. It would be cruel to deny him otherwise.

"I am going as well," Dori suddenly spoke up and *that* took Thorin, along with all the other remaining Dwarves, by surprise. "If there is anything I can do for Ori – " His voice broke, and he shook his head. "I am going," he repeated simply, stubbornly.

"I will stay, your Majesty. Someone has to prepare the gold as per the kidnappers' request," Balin calmly volunteered. He added with a hint of sarcasm, "Not to mention, one of us has to suffer through the tediousness of paperwork once Master Nori and Master Glóin return to report their missions."

"Bombur, Bifur, and I will help Master Balin! It is cruel to leave a Dwarf alone with nothing but paperwork for company," Bofur said jovially with a cheeky wink to Balin. The advisor rolled his eyes in Bofur's direction in mock exasperation.

"Thank you, brave heroes for saving me from this cruel and unusual torture," Balin deadpanned, and Thorin found himself reluctantly smiling at the display. Leave it to Balin to retain all of his wits and dry sarcasm even in the most dire of

situations.

Dáin grinned widely at Balin. "How very noble of you, Master Balin," he exclaimed, bright and energetic, "but unlike you, *I* am not above running from the dreaded paperwork, and run I shall, now that I have been given the perfect excuse to do so!" He signed a quick 'thank you' in Iglishmêk to the scowling, unimpressed advisor. "I leave this camp in Master Balin and Master Frór's very capable hands and, if my cousin doesn't mind, I would very much like to pay King Bard a visit as well."

"Now that everyone knows what we're doing, what are we waiting for?" Dwalin grunted. "Let's go."

"Can you see anything?" Ori asked breathlessly. He shifted his stance, and tightened his grip on Bilbo's feet to keep him steady.

"No," Bilbo called out, gripping the window ledge to keep himself more balanced while standing on Ori's shoulders. The last thing he wanted was to fall and crush his already injured friend. "All I see is grass, more grass and – oh, I think I might hear a roaring river nearby!"

"But can you see the river?"

"No, there is nothing to see out of this window. If this is how it looks like from all directions, then we are literally stuck in the middle of nowhere." Bilbo scanned the area again in some vain hope that he will spot something more interesting. "A grassy, flat piece of nowhere," he repeated, defeated. "Alright, you can lower me down now. We will have to come up with another plan."

It wasn't the first time that Bilbo and Ori were met with disappointment that evening. Immediately after Haldan had left and Ori was freed from his rope bindings, he and Bilbo searched frantically through their pockets. "My knife, my slingshot and my money are gone," Ori said, running a hand through his dishevelled hair. His eyes widened when he felt something else missing, and he blurted out, "did they cut off my braid?!"

Bilbo paused his rummaging, and looked up. "Oh, you *are* missing a braid!" He made a disgusted face. "What could they possibly do with that?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know either," Ori replied sullenly. He wrapped his arms protectively over his chest, looking so miserable that Bilbo's heart ached for the Dwarf. "I just wished they had cut from a different spot on my head. My mother gave me the ribbon that was used to tie that braid!"

"I'll get it back for you, Ori," Bilbo promised, his hand already reaching into his pocket where he usually kept his tell-tale velvet pouch. "I just need to put on my – " He paused mid-sentence when he felt the lining of his very *empty* pocket. Frantically, he patted himself down, despairing that he could not feel his ring on his person. "Those thieving scoundrels!" he exclaimed, "They stole my ring!"

He chose to ignore the irony of that statement and how he had essentially done the same to that creature in the Misty Mountains.

"Now what do we do?" Ori asked, his eyes catching on the waning beam of sunlight that fell on a patch of broken floor board. "At least we have a window in here to let us know what time of the day it is. It looks like we still have a little bit of daylight left before night falls."

No sooner had Ori finished uttering those words than he and Bilbo widened their eyes in realization. Together in unison, they followed the light beam to its source with their gaze, craning their heads until they spotted the round, little window high above them. Neither of them could reach it alone, but maybe if one was standing on top the other's shoulders...

Bilbo and Ori exchanged long glances at each other.

And this was what brought them to their current predicament.

"It's a shame that neither of us could fit through that space," Bilbo mused when they had finally taken a seat on the floor to think of a new escape plan. "If only I had my ring back, I could have used that to sneak out when they bring us our food. I could use it to steal the keys to this door and find our belongings." He rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hands, groaning in frustration. This entire situation was reminding him too much of the miserable experience he had in Thranduil's hall. He had joked darkly to himself at that time, in a sad attempt to keep his spirit up, that escaping from captivity was one of those once in a lifetime experiences that makes for a good pub story. That was, of course, before his meeting with Smaug which, as far as pub stories go, trumps every single one in Bilbo's repertoire.

He really did not need to go through yet another capture again.

"I think I might have heard one of the men talk about your ring."

Bilbo whipped his head up to stare at Ori. The young Dwarf had seated himself comfortably with his back against the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him, and his clasped hands resting over his belly. His eyes were looking up at the ceiling, lost in thought. "When I first woke up, the men were arguing loudly about who got to keep it. A fight broke out,

and things got ugly until one of them strong armed his way into victory." Ori pinched the bridge of his nose, scrunching his face in concentration. "I'm pretty sure they called him Galion."

"Great," Bilbo muttered, burying his face in his hands again. Just when he thought his luck could not get any more rotten. "They probably discovered what it can do. Why else would they be fighting over it like that?"

"It will be alright, Mister Baggins. We've been through worse." Ori got up, dusted himself off and took a seat beside Bilbo. He gently nudged the Hobbit with his shoulders, earning him a small smile from his friend. "It's a shame that we had to miss that meeting with the King though. I wonder what he wanted to see us all for?" He pulled back, alarmed, when Bilbo started to choke violently. "Are you alright, Mister Baggins? Was it something I said?" he asked in distress.

Bilbo was saved from having to explain himself when the door swung open, and one of their captors stumbled in. A pungent smell of alcohol came wafting after him, flooding the room.

"Well, well, well! Would ya look at that! How're you gents doin' this fine ev'ning?" The newcomer slurred out loudly. His eyes were fever bright, his dark hair and beard were scraggly, and his mouth was stretched into a too-wide grin that showcased his yellowing teeth. He took an unsteady step forward, almost falling face-first to the ground from the dangerous way that he was swaying, but he regained his footing at the last second. He was holding a short dagger in one hand and in the other a set of brass keys. They jingled with every swing of his arms.

Bilbo stayed completely still, and glared darkly at the man. As far as enemies go, he wasn't terribly impressive; he was much shorter than his other companions, barely standing an inch or two taller than Thorin by Bilbo's estimation. However, whereas the Dwarf's strength and solid build could more than make up for his lack of height, their new visitor was rail thin.

"Oh come on luv, don't be like that! I just wanna talk is all!" The man cooed when neither Bilbo nor Ori returned his greeting. He cocked his head to the side, and swung his knife at them, adding in a sing-song voice, "Now which one of yous could tell me more 'bout that pretty lil' ring of yours?"

That question took Bilbo by surprise, but he did not react outwardly at all. From the corner of his eyes, he could see that Ori had also kept his face stony.

He did not miss the way that the Dwarf's eyes kept flicking to the set of keys either.

"Ring? What ring?" Bilbo asked politely, his mind quickly coming up with an idea to escape. He glanced at Ori, and nodded his head just a fraction, hoping that the Dwarf would catch on, and then he quickly turned his attention back to their captor. "I don't know anything about any rings," he repeated.

The man laughed a dry raspy laugh. "Come now, don't play dumb. I'm talking 'bout the ring we found on you. The magic ring!"

Bilbo rubbed at his chin, making a show of concentrating on his thoughts before he broke into a bright smile. "Oh! Yes, *that* magic ring! Why, I woke up and found it missing, and you cannot imagine my distress!" He planted his hands on his hips as he levelled the man with a disapproving look. "I hope you gentlemen have plans to return it! That ring means a great deal to me!" He did not dare to turn to Ori as the Dwarf slowly edged away from him.

"Oh no, no, no, we wouldn't dare." The man shook his head fervently with gross exaggeration. Bilbo was unimpressed by what horrible liar he was. "But you see, Master Halfling, me and my – " he hiccupped, "me and my companions were real impressed by this ring of yours and we just...wanna borrow it, is all. To take a look!" He looked extremely pleased with himself, no doubt thinking that his fast wit had fooled Bilbo. "We'd be happy to return it to ya if you can maybe tell us where to get s'more?"

Bilbo blinked. "Some more?" he echoed dumbly because *honestly* he had never heard anything more ridiculous. Were they expecting him to keep a stash of magic rings in his tent?

"Yes, of course!" The man nodded eagerly, his large grin was threatening to split his face, but his eyes were dark and hungry. He stumbled towards Bilbo, and the Hobbit automatically backed away to keep out of reach from the knife. "You must be able to get yer hands on s'more! You're friends with that Wizard aren't ya? And you're friends with those Elves, and with Bard, and with them Dwarves as well!" The man shuffled closer, forcing Bilbo to take another uneasy step back. "And don't even get me started on them Dwarves! Everyone knows 'bout you and Thorin!"

Bilbo flinched. "Me and Thorin?" he squeaked out.

"Yes! You and Thorin and your...epic love story!" The drunk threw his hands up impatiently with the knife and the keys still in his grip. "It's out for the whole bloody world to hear, what with 'em ballads – whatsit called? 'The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins' and 'The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield'! And let's not forget about them suggestive drawings on those pamphlets!"

Bilbo felt a flood of mortification came over him. By the makers, was he and Thorin the last to know about their mutual attraction? He glanced quickly at Ori, who was almost behind their captor, and caught the Dwarf mouthing the words 'I'm so sorry' back at him. Ori looked extremely sheepish.

"W-well, you're...absolutely right!" Bilbo ended with false cheer, trying to regain control of the situation while not glaring at Ori for *those images.* "About my...my relationship with Thorin, and my friendship with the Elves, with King

Bard, and with Gandalf." He leaned slightly forward, and dropped his voice to whisper conspiratorially, "I also know where to get more of those rings, but to do that, you...uh..." He wracked his brain for an answer.

"Yes, go on, wot is it?" the man demanded none too kindly.

"You...uh...you will need," Bilbo stammered. "You will need to – *duck*!"

He rolled out of the way just as Ori launched himself on their captor's back, sending them both crashing violently into the ground. The knife and the keys flew out of the man's grip, and they skittered across the floor in different directions. Torn between the two items, it took Bilbo a split second longer to decide on grabbing the keys first before he could dash over to where he thought he had seen them land. Meanwhile, he could hear Ori desperately wrestling the man into submission, and he blocked out their pained grunts to focus on his search. The darkness of the room and the multiple holes in the broken planks made spotting the keys extremely difficult, and Bilbo, frustrated, immediately got to his knees, groping around blindly for the lost item with shaking hands and a racing heart.

Come on, where is it? Where is it? He thought frantically as sweat began to bead his brow. His fingers brushed against an object – a solid ring – and the resounding *clink* it made was the most beautiful sound he has ever heard. *Yes, found it!*

Ori's pained cry startled Bilbo out of his premature sense of victory, and the Hobbit whirled around just in time to see his friend being forced to his knees by their captor. Gripping tightly on Ori's hair with one hand, the man pulled the Dwarf's head back, exposing the pale length of his vulnerable neck. His other hand drew out a second, concealed knife from his belt and he pressed the blade menacingly against Ori's jugular.

"You shouldn't have done that, Dwarf!" The man spat out, his face filled with terrifying rage. "Just for that, I'm gonna slit yer throat open in front of yer friend!"

"What in the – Aldor, you idiot, stop! We need him alive!"

Three other figures rushed into the room with two of them pulling the drunk – *Aldor*, Bilbo's mind supplied – away from Ori. The third man beelined straight towards Bilbo, and had him pinned face-first to the ground before he could fight back. The Hobbit desperately twisted to get himself loose but to no avail, and he let out a cry in protest when he felt the keys wrenched forcibly out of his hands.

"You got him, Mallor?"

"Yes, Galion," answered the man who was holding him down, and Bilbo felt the hand gripping his shoulder tightened painfully. "He isn't going anywhere."

Bilbo raised his head as best he could from his pinned position. Galion? Wasn't that the one who has his ring?

"Good," Galion grunted distractedly as he tried to hold a violently thrashing Ori still, but the Dwarf was having none of it. Ori was fighting like a mad man; he was clawing at his captor's tunics, throwing wild kicks that end up missing more than anything. "For the love of the Gods, Aldor! What the hell did you do?"

"He accosted us!" Bilbo shouted desperately before Aldor could get a word in edgewise. "He came in drunk, and attacked us!"

"Wait, what? That's not true at all!" Aldor looked up, and snarled. He was held in a grappling hold by the large man, the one from before who was present during Haldan's visit.

"We were minding our own business, and he came in waving a knife at us, muttering something about magic! We were acting entirely on self-defence!" Bilbo cried out, loud enough to drown out Aldor's spluttering protests. "I thought Haldan didn't want us dead! Wait until he hears about this! I'm going to have a word with him!"

"Now, now, Master Hobbit, let's not be too hasty!" Galion replied, having finally subdued Ori by pinning him to the ground in a similar hold that kept Bilbo from escaping. "I'm sure that this is all just a massive misunderstanding! Our friend here overindulged, and you know how people can be with a bit of liquid courage warming their bellies. Isn't that right, Aldor?"

Aldor mumbled something unpleasant under his breath, but even in his state, he could recognize the cold, dangerous glint in Galion's gaze. He nodded once, cowed into submission.

"See? No hard feelings, right?" Galion grinned, sharply. "Now, is there something else that we could bring you before we go, gentlemen?"

"Bandages and salves," Bilbo gritted out, remembering Ori's cry of pain. "And a pan of fresh water."

"Of course! We shall have that for you soon. Have a pleasant evening!"

Bilbo felt himself being roughly released, and he promptly rolled over to his back, wincing at the tightness of his joints and the lingering ache in his muscles. He waited until he heard the door close and the sound of retreating footsteps fade before clamouring to his feet.

"Ori! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Ori replied, pale-faced and shaking as Bilbo helped him sit up. "Just got my leg hurt on a piece of floor board during that tussle. It's nothing. What's more important is that the plan was a complete success!"

Bilbo watched Ori reach into the folds of his tunic to pull out a familiar velvet pouch. "I pick pocketed this from Galion." He grinned, tossing the bag back to a visibly gobsmacked Bilbo. "It looks like we got the ring back!"

Notes:

Thank you for all your lovely reviews/comments/kudos/favourites/recs! As always, knowing that there are people out there who're enjoying this is the best motivation that anyone can get! I read all of the comments and I try to respond to all of them (except if they were left as anon on ffnet. Sorry, I can't respond to those, but rest assured, I have read them!) Please let me know how you are enjoying this chapter and many thanks once again! Hopefully, the next part will really bring us to the end of this fic. :)

Unless I add an epilogue or something. Ah, I'll figure that out later. ;)

Notes about this chapter:

[1] I made the assumption that a gold coin from Erebor has a gold content of 10 grams/coin, which is higher than a Julius Caesar Aureus coin (8.18 grams). 1 coin is the modern equivalent of $402 US. Based on the ransomer's demand, Haldan and his crew are walking away with a total of approx $10 million. Divide this up by five people and we have $2 million per person. On top of that, those $2 million weigh about 110 lb. Quite heavy!

They really couldn't ask for any more without making it hard for them to carry the gold.

I also assumed that each Ereborean gold coin is the size of a Canadian/American quarter. Those $2 million worth of coins can fit neatly into a 8 inch x 9 inch x 5 inch box (or 20.3 cm x 22.9 cm x 12.7 cm).
And that's entirely wayyyy too much math than anyone cares to know. If you're still reading this, you deserve a cookie.

[2] Bilbo's flash back to the Fell Winter (T.A. 2911 – 2912): Bilbo was 22 years old at the time. I took some creative liberties and assumed that he was a young child.

[3] Fili, Kili and the Ravens: I am operating on the assumption that Fili and Kili do not know Raven-speech. Fortunately, Roäc spoke Westron and like most Ravens, enjoys shiny things, which explains Thorin's payment of 'brightest golden beads'.

[4] Yes, Galion is the Elf butler who works for Thranduil. There is a reason why the captor shares that name despite being a Man. That should be revealed in the next chapter. :D

Chapter 11 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1849109)

Notes:

What is this, a double post?! 8D Hello friends! As you may have noticed already, I've posted two chapters instead of one. It was all originally supposed to be one final chapter, but I figured that a break in between would allow us all some much needed breathing room (if you wish it). Both chapters are pretty wordy so as always, for those of you who like to read in the morning before work/school, please watch your time so that you won't be late. ;)

Allons-y!

Unedited for now. All mistakes are mine. Apologies in advance!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_11_endnotes) .)

Part XV: Everyone including, but not limited to, the Iron Hills, Erebor, the Blue Mountains, Dale and Lake-town. And possibly Mirkwood, but Thranduil's a bit of a secretive ass so nobody is quite sure about him.

Bilbo had always admired Ori for his tenacity. As the weedy scribe of the Company while being surrounded by burly warriors, it was evident that Ori was very much out of his element like Bilbo was. However, if the young Dwarf had ever felt uncomfortable, he had done a marvellous job disguising it. Armed with a small sling shot and a knife, Ori had faced his adversaries without hesitation, fighting even more viciously than his two elder brothers.

Bilbo was starting to suspect that it was not the Dwarf's tenacity that was his driving force, but his insanity.

And maybe his deep-seated anger issues.

"The plan will work!" the scribe insisted, "All you have to do is get him in the knees and I'll hit him over the head! We have perfectly good wooden planks to get the job done!" Ori held up one of the planks – a piece of the floor board that had

come loose during his scuffle with the drunk – and swung it demonstratively. Bilbo instinctively backed away to avoid being hit.

"You're injured!" Bilbo exclaimed in alarm. "I just bandaged up your leg and now, you want to start another fight?"

Bilbo had suitably panicked when he saw the deep, bleeding gash that ran down the length of Ori's shin. Ori, in his typical Dwarven fashion, had brushed off his injury with a casual, "it's just a cut, Bilbo! We've been through worse!"

Showing off his own brand of Hobbit stubbornness, Bilbo dutifully ignored the Dwarf by bringing the clean, wet rag that he had requested from Galion to wash away the dried blood. He continued his ministration even when Ori had mumbled that he was "literally being worse than Dori". The sharp, unimpressed look that Bilbo had given the scribe was enough to stop his sullen mutterings.

"Look," Bilbo brought his fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose, "Why don't we try a different tactic? One that involves more stealth and less," he waved at the plank in Ori's hand, "skull bashing." He added hastily when it looked like the scribe was about to argue, "I'm not saying no to the skull bashing, just less of that. We don't want to attract too much attention if we want to sneak our way out of this place."

Ori gently lowered his makeshift weapon and shifted his footing to put more weight on his good leg. "Alright, what do you suggest then?"

"Well," Bilbo started, his mind whirring as new ideas are flooding into his head, "I was thinking that we could go with this plan..."

Thorin had hoped that it would be another two decades before he had to deal with a crisis large enough to merit sitting through a long, frantic, and tension-filled meeting. The last one of its kind was the peace treaty with that tree-shagging Elf, and the experience was such a terrible one that it rightfully earned its spot as the third most traumatizing meetings that Thorin had endured. The only other meetings to have topped it on the scale of horribleness were the one with his father and grandfather (to explain the events of his 60th birthday, which would *not* be repeated), and that time when his advisors tried to dissuade his sister from starting her distillery business.

The latter had ended in bloodshed and tears, none of which belonged to the princess.

"This is incredibly troubling news, my friends. You are certain that the attackers were Men?" Bard asked with a hint of suspicion, his voice made louder by the confines of the quiet, candle-lit tent. He placed his clasped hands on the weathered oak table and leaned closer to stare hard at the four dishevelled Dwarves seated directly across from him.

Beside Thorin, Dwalin and Dori stiffened in their seats and they simultaneously glared back. Even Dáin, who was an expert at disguising his feelings, found it hard pressed to keep up his calm and collected façade; for once, the Dwarven Lord was wearing an openly pinched expression with his brows drawn and his lips pursed.

Thorin might just have to reconsider a new addition to his list of terrible meetings if Bard continued to question every single damned thing that the Dwarves were telling him.

"My advisor was attacked by four Men who disguised themselves as workers," Dáin replied a bit too tersely to be polite. "While I understand that being a victim to a savage beating is highly traumatic, I doubt that Master Borin would be so startled to the point of being unable to identify the race of his attackers."

"Peace, your Grace, I mean no offense." Bard held his hands up in a pacifying gesture and Thorin felt his tense shoulders loosen a little. "Master Baggins has won both the love of the Lake-town Men and those from Dale. Naturally, I would have some reservation in believing that they would have dared to kidnap him."

Thorin crossed his arms, unimpressed all the same. "Be that as it may, the truth still remains that Master Borin was attacked, and Bilbo and Ori were taken," the Dwarf growled out. "If it weren't for Master Borin's interference, we would not have known who the attackers were."

Bard inclined his head towards Thorin to acknowledge his point. "Please send my wishes to Master Borin for a speedy recovery. I am, however, curious to know what was so urgent that he had to seek Master Baggins' council at that time rather than setting up a meeting in a more secured location."

Thorin and Dáin exchanged a quick glance with each other. Should they drag up the issue regarding the rumours surrounding Haldan? It wasn't any of the Dwarves' business who King Bard decided to elect for his council, not to mention, it hardly seemed appropriate to discuss this matter at the moment when a more serious issue was in play. On the other hand, noble, grim-faced Bard was a soldier and a captain before he took up the mantle of kingship, and Thorin knew that as with most soldiers, Bard appreciated an honest, straightforward answer above all else.

In that sense, Bard and Dwalin had a lot in common.

With his mind made up, Thorin cleared his throat and said, "Master Borin had some pressing news to deliver to Bilbo. Apparently, he heard some distressing rumours about Master Haldan and had wanted to speak to him about that."

Thorin had several guesses as to how Bard would respond to this news, but a resigned, tired sigh was not one of them.

"I'm assuming that Master Borin mentioned something about my advisor stealing from me?" At the Dwarves' stunned silence, Bard shook his head and continued gravely, "That seems to be the newest set of lies that are currently being circulated, no doubt started by the townsmen who are still bitter about Mister Haldan's past association with the Master."

Dori's sharp inhale caught Thorin by surprise until he remembered that he, Dwalin, or anyone from the Company for that matter, were not told about Master Borin's findings on Haldan. Silently, he cursed at himself for his forgetfulness. It wasn't like him to be this careless and he desperately hoped that Nori's search had not been affected without this minor detail. Either way, he will have to rectify this situation immediately upon his return to the camp.

"So, Mister Haldan has indeed worked as the Master's accountant then," Dáin pressed on, unaware of Thorin's musing.

"Yes, and I am also fully aware of that fact when I hired him," Bard admitted without hesitation. "However, I am also certain that my advisor was judged unfairly and too harshly for his actions by those who are seeking an outlet for their frustration. Not once has Mister Haldan given me any reason to doubt his honesty." The corners of Bard's lips curled up unexpectedly and Thorin was amazed at how this simple gesture had lightened his severe expression. "If anything, Mister Haldan has made it his personal mission that I *keep* all of my money, even down to the last copper coin. His spending plans for Dale are proof of that, what with them being so tight-fisted and conservative to the point of being unfeasible. He even scolded me for being too careless with my book-keeping and insisted that I write absolutely everything down least I get my accounts wrong."

Thorin felt a fleeting moment of embarrassment under the weight of Bard's sceptical look. "If he really was plotting to steal my money, then he has been going about this completely backwards," Bard said reasonably. "Wouldn't the thief want to encourage sloppy book-keeping so that he can use it to cover up his theft?"

King Bard had a point and a part of Thorin felt like he could breathe a sigh of relief over the news. Anyone who had spent some time in the farms could see how Bilbo had become fast friends with the advisor, and Thorin had rather liked the idea that Bilbo had a fellow plant-enthusiast to keep him company on the odd days that he could not work in the farms. The last thing that Thorin wanted was to break Bilbo's heart by telling him to keep away from Haldan.

Perhaps what was the most convincing about Bard's argument was how clearly Thorin could picture the tall, lanky, nervous advisor being the target of his peers' malicious rumours. It was easy to single out someone who seemed weaker or more different from the pack, especially if this person was placed in an enviable position that many others coveted. For the longest time, Thorin himself had worried that Bilbo would suffer the same fate if not for the highly popularized Ballad of Bilbo Baggins (and, he began to suspect, those *pamphlets*) that had painted such a positive image of his Hobbit. He could thank the efforts of his loyal Company for the latter.

Thorin could only hope that Bard's unfortunate advisor has a similar group of supporters whom he could draw comfort while he weathers this storm of slander and lies.

"Thank you for clarifying this matter," Thorin shook himself out of his reverie and began graciously, "I am more – "

"Your Majesty! I have urgent news!"

Startled, the tent's occupants quickly turned their heads towards the entrance where a visibly agitated blond was strolling through to reach to Bard's side. Thorin instantly recognized him as one of Bard's advisors.

"Speak, we are among trusted friends here," Bard ordered when he saw his advisor casting fugitive glances at the Dwarves.

"Haldan is missing, your Majesty," the advisor said urgently. "The other advisors and I were scheduled to meet with him to discuss his latest financial report but it has been three hours and none could find him anywhere."

"When was the last time that anyone has seen him?"

"At the mess hall during dinner at around seven o'clock, my liege. Many soldiers have noticed him there. Apparently, he had made quite the spectacle of himself when he accidentally spilled his food tray on one of them."

Bard swiftly rose to his feet without sparing another second. "Gather my captains and all the men they could spare, and have them meet me outside of this tent. We must immediately form a hunting party to search around the premise. Go, now!"

The advisor bowed clumsily to his King and to the Dwarves before bolting out of the tent.

"Trouble is afoot," Bard muttered, the worry lines deepening in his forehead. "First, Master Baggins got kidnapped and now my advisor is missing."

Dori cleared his throat lightly and spoke up for the first time in a soft, but clear, voice, "Your Majesty, we estimated that Bilbo and Ori were captured at around six o'clock. If it is true that Master Haldan has disappeared shortly after seven o'clock, then these events have occurred too closely with each other to be mere coincidental."

Bard nodded in return. "I agree with your assessment, Master Dwarf. It seems like we are in the same predicament and it would be foolish for us not to stand together in this time of need. My friends, you have the aid of my men as you see fit. Let us work together to uncover the ones behind these attacks."

It was with a renewed sense of worry that weighed heavily in the Dwarves' hearts when they made their way back to Thorin's tent. Night had truly descended by this point, bringing along a sharp chill in the spring air and a sense of unnatural stillness across the camp. Thorin supposed that if Bilbo were here, they would profit from this rare moment of peace by taking a late night stroll around the camp. They would wind their way through the clusters of tents, for once, their minds untroubled by the unpleasant thoughts of work, and they would let their feet guide them towards the gentle riverbank of the River Running. With the soft grass against their backs and the never ending expanse of the starlit sky stretched high above their heads, Thorin cannot imagine a more fitting time to present his first courting gift to his Hobbit.

Thorin grimaced at the deep-seated melancholy that flooded his heart and he automatically reached into his pocket, his fingers brushing against the cold, engraved surface of the round metal bead. It was one of the few luxury items that he had permitted for himself on the journey to Erebor, one that he was able to hold on to despite all the bad luck that his Company had encountered.

He was infinitely glad for this small miracle. This bead was one of the few possessions that he had left of his mother, and he still remembered the day when she had wrangled a promise from him to present it to his future consort.

"Why are you so insistent that I give this to my consort anyway? I don't want it!" Thorin had whined petulantly as he squinted at the shining, innocent bead in his open palm.

"Don't you dare take that tone with me, young man!" his mother snapped at him, irritated. She absentmindedly laid her hand over her swollen belly and rubbed small, soothing circles over it. "And if you must know, I want you to give this to your future mate as a symbol of my approval."

Thorin grimaced. "Why can't you just give her your approval in person? I don't see the point of all this."

He quickly snapped his mouth shut at the soft, sad look that his mother gave him, feeling instantly ashamed. She sighed and brushed back a stray lock of his dark hair from his face. "Oh dear child," she murmured, "I can't be here forever, you know."

She died three months later in childbirth.

Thorin took a deep breath, and another, until he could finally ignore the too tight feeling in his chest. He had made a promise that day and he will honour his words and his mother. When Bilbo returns to his side, he will braid his mother's bead into his Hobbit's hair so that all may recognize him as the one whom Thorin had chosen.

He has a feeling that his mother would have liked Bilbo Baggins.

"I can't believe that we couldn't find any traces of Mister Haldan," Dwalin shook his head and muttered in annoyance, finally breaking the silence of the group and successfully pulling Thorin's attention away from his thoughts. "No ransom note, no body, nothing."

"Aye." Dori answered despondently from beside the warrior. He ran a hand over his loosening braids and grimaced, "Although if I were King Bard, I would be more worried by the lack of a ransom note."

"Come morning time and with the aid of Bard's thrushes, the Men should be able to cover twice the amount of ground than we did tonight," Thorin answered gruffly. He stopped a few steps away from his tent's entrance at the sound of muffled conversations. "It looks like the rest of the Company has arrived. Hopefully, they have found something useful."

Thorin would be glad to know that he was right on both counts if he wasn't temporarily blinded by the sight of disarray in his room. His companions had taken up every last inch of free space available, either stretched out on the ground, half-asleep or keeping themselves entertained with playing cards. Nori and Balin were the only exceptions, and they were hunched over a sprawling, detailed map of Lake-town that lay draped on the floor like a gaudy, accent rug. The two would occasionally bring their heads together to mutter quietly between themselves while pointing at different parts of the map.

"Uncle!" Fíli cried out in excitement. He raised his head off of Kíli's lap and jumped to his feet from his laid out position. His brother scrambled after him a second later. "What happened? Did King Bard say anything?"

The Dwarves shuffled closer to Thorin as he began to recount the events in Dale. When he got to the part about the rumours surrounding Haldan and the scandal with the previous Lake-town Master, Thorin casted a quick glance at Nori and was surprised to see the Dwarf completely unruffled by the news. The Dwarven king felt the knot of worry unravel a little. It looked like Nori was able to discover this information on his own after all.

"And now, Mister Haldan is missing. His last known whereabouts was in the mess hall at seven o'clock this evening," Thorin concluded. "We spent the last few hours scouring the camp and its periphery but we could not find anything. We suspect that this is linked to Bilbo and Ori's disappearances, so King Bard was more than willing to work with us on this matter."

"This is most puzzling," Balin muttered to the backdrop of renewed chattering among the interested Dwarves.

"But not completely unrelated to the information I found." Nori frowned and fished out a folded note from the inside of his tunic. "I managed to find a worker who was seen leaving our camp at around six o'clock with an obvious knee injury: Mister Mallor from Lake-town, with brown hair, brown eyes, and he has the same height as King Bard. He wasn't

pushing a cart or carrying anything when he left, but common sense would dictate that his accomplices would be the ones who carry Bilbo and Ori out rather than leaving this task to their injured friend." Nori passed the note to Thorin and continued, "It also happens that Mister Mallor worked for the previous Lake-town Master as his scribe and astronomer."

"Which means that he would be well acquainted with Mister Haldan," Balin added to Nori's explanation.

Thorin unfolded the note and stared at the rough ink sketch of the man's profile. Mister Mallor, for all intent and purpose, was disappointingly average looking; he had a square jaw peppered with stubbles, a thick head of curly locks that fell below his ears, a set of thin lips, a straight, button nose, and a pair of close set eyes. Aside from a splattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, he had no other discernable marks on his face.

"What else do we know about this Mister Mallor?" Thorin asked. He passed the note to Dwalin, who lowered it so that Dori could get a better view of the image from beside him.

"He is unmarried and the only family he had was his uncle who died a few years back. Other than that, he is a quiet fellow who likes to keep to himself," Nori clasped his hands behind his back and dutifully recited from memory. "After that embezzling scandal was revealed, his circle of acquaintances quickly diminished. Nowadays, he works in a river barge with one of his few remaining friends by collecting the empty barrels that flow down the river."

"And this friend of his, did he also work for the Master?" Dáin asked. He took Mister Mallor's image from Dwalin and peered down at it curiously.

Nori nodded and once again, he rifled through the inner pocket of his tunic. "Those who worked with the Master are sticking together. Safety in number is what I'm guessing, and I wouldn't blame them. That embezzling business has gotten a lot of people *very* angry." He pulled out another folded note and handed it to Thorin. "His friend's name is Galion, an odd name for a Man, I know," he said quickly when Thorin whipped his head up from the page at the distinctly Elvish name, "but take a look and you'll understand why."

Thorin glanced back down at the drawing and found himself raising his brows in surprise. Whereas Mister Mallor was rather plain looking, Mister Galion was the exact opposite. The Man was strikingly beautiful in the way that the Elves were with his almond eyes, his aquiline nose, and the delicate contour of his clean shaven jaw. His straight hair parted neatly in the middle around his thin face, falling just above his collarbone where it curled slightly at the ends. If it weren't for his rounded ears, Thorin would have been convinced that he was staring at one of Thranduil's people.

Just to be sure, Thorin squinted hard at the ears again. No, they were most definitely not pointed.

Nori continued with his report, "Mister Galion has yellow hair, light blue eyes and is as tall as his friend. He also comes from one of the wealthiest families in Lake-town with his father owning the wineries of the region. The wine that those Mirkwood tree-shaggers guzzle down is produced by Mister Galion's family and they are extremely proud of that." Nori shrugged, "Here is where things take a turn for the bizarre – That family is especially enamoured with the Elves to the point of obsession. They would often claim to have 'close ties' with them, even if technically, they've never actually had any proper dealings with the Elves save for the rare meetings with an Elven servant to negotiate wine prices."

Thorin glanced down at the portrait again and grimaced. He was more than familiar with the dark, dangerous feelings of obsession, to have his waking moments be so utterly consumed by an object that all the things around him cease to matter so long as he could continue to bask in its presence. His gold sickness was a testament to that.

Feeling a bit sick to his stomach, Thorin averted his eyes and he quickly handed the drawing to his cousin who, upon catching a closer look at the portrait, let loose a low whistle.

"This obsession grew to the point that the family members would style themselves after the weed-eaters. They would go so far as to bleach their hair blonde with vinegar and name their children after the Elves." Nori gestured at the drawing in Dáin's hands. "Mister Galion here is the unfortunate product of his family's illness."

Glóin peered over Dáin's shoulder, frowned at the image and said, "I almost feel sorry for the poor sod."

"But if he's so rich, why is he working with Mister Mallor as a barrel collector?" Bombur asked just as he was handed both Galion and Mallor's sketches at the same time. He held the drawings up for everyone before they could bowl him over in their attempt to crowd closer.

"After the embezzling scandal was revealed, Mister Galion has been disowned by his family in their effort to be spared from the townsmens' wrath. He is as penniless as a pauper now and he is in a sad, desperate situation."

"And here I thought that I could not dislike that family even more!" Glóin shook his head in disgust. Thorin could not agree more with that sentiment. To abandon kin just to save their own skin was an honourless act that reeked of cowardice. Thorin was certain that any of his Dwarves would sooner choose death than to betray their own flesh and blood like that.

"Wait a minute, was Mister Galion scheduled to visit our camp today?" Dori asked sharply and Nori gave his older brother a slow, dangerous grin of approval. Master Dori had apparently asked the right question.

"He was seen leaving our camp at around six o'clock. Unfortunately, he wasn't carrying anything when he left the premise."

"It's enough to make him a potential suspect," Dwalin crossed his arms over his chest and growled out. "Not to mention, he's probably desperate for money so the motive is there."

Fíli furrowed his brows in concentration and spoke up from his spot near the back of the crowd, "If those two suspects are our kidnappers, then by the process of elimination, we have two attackers left to find – the tall one and the small one. One of them has to have carried Bilbo and Ori out!"

"I reckon it's the tall one who got the short end of the stick." Kíli muttered under his breath as if he was speaking from experience, "It's *always* the taller ones who are bullied into doing all the labour." He gave his older, but shorter brother a very pointed look. Fíli answered with the largest shit-eating grin he could muster.

Bofur rolled his eyes at the princes' antics. "Any idea on who the two remaining attackers are then?" he asked.

Nori shook his head. "Unfortunately, not at the moment. I am still in the process of drafting a list of potential suspects."

"In the meantime, we have started to map out the places that Mister Mallor visits regularly." Balin gestured at the Lake-town map on the floor and Thorin could see that it already sported his advisor's neat letters over several locations of interest. "We were able to piece together his day-to-day schedule. Hopefully, we can use this information to find more potential suspects."

Thorin nodded, pleased by the progress. "You have all done well and the very least, we have something to go on. Our two suspects are connected with Mister Haldan from their past association with the Master. Now, if we could only find Mister Haldan himself. I have a feeling that he is the key to our puzzle."

"What do you suppose happened to Mister Haldan?" Óin stroked his beard and wondered out loud.

"Maybe he was forcefully silenced," Kíli offered. "Mister Haldan knew who the attackers were so they went after him to make sure that there weren't any loose ends to their plan. Then, they..." He trailed off ominously, raising his hand to trace a straight line across his neck to mimic a cut throat.

"Or maybe, the attackers thought Mister Haldan knew who they were," Fíli chimed in, "and when they attacked Mister Haldan, he ran for his life, only to...you know." He mirrored his brother's gesture.

"It could also be that Mister Haldan knew that the attackers knew that he knew," Kíli added with growing excitement. "So Mister Haldan made a run for it to save his own skin...only to, you know."

"Or the attackers knew that Mister Haldan knew that the attackers knew that he knew but Mister Haldan still ended up...you know."

"What about if Mister Haldan knew that the attackers knew that Mister Haldan knew about – "

"Why are the two of you are so fixated with Mister Haldan dying? The man could still be alive!" Óin huffed. "I think he ran to save his own skin from those attackers. He's probably somewhere out in the wilderness right now."

"Hold on, I think the lads were on to something," Glóin said to his brother, "the attackers could very well be lying in wait for Mister Haldan."

Óin scoffed and Glóin bristled at the dismissal. "How? They were carrying Bilbo and Ori at the time. I highly doubt they would make a brief detour to go after Mister Haldan when they have bigger things to worry about."

"They could have split up!" Bombur suggested helpfully. "Send two members of their party to take out Mister Haldan while the other two transport Bilbo and Ori away."

"Or, Mister Haldan could have been tricked into leaving the premise to meet up with the attackers," Nori pointed out among the growing rabble in the tent, and just like that, the room dissolved into chaos.

"I think he was attacked!"

"And I think he ran! Mister Haldan's a nervous sort. He seems like the type to run at the drop of a pin!"

"I think he tried to run but his action only drew the attention of his attackers, so his attempt to escape led to his downfall."

"Maybe, Mister Haldan was attacked but he managed to escape! I think he's still alive! He probably managed to burrow somewhere safe to spend the night."

"What if he's a part of the kidnapping?" Bofur exclaimed and the room fell into a hushed silence. Undeterred, he continued, "What if Mister Haldan was one of the kidnappers?"

A chorus of disbelieving scoffs followed that comment and Bofur flushed in embarrassment.

"There were four kidnappers and they attacked at around six o'clock. Mister Haldan was seen in Dale up until seven o'clock!" Bifur explained, his Khuzdûl characteristically peppered with a few signs in Iglishmêk.

"He has several alibis," Dori elaborated kindly. "Practically the whole mess hall saw him spill his food tray on someone else during dinner time."

"We can worry about Mister Haldan later," Thorin spoke over his companions, his tone hard and commanding. "For now, we should focus on our suspects."

"Well, we can't approach Mister Mallor and beat the answer out of him," Dwalin uttered, and Thorin noted the disappointment in his voice. "The ransom letter specifically said that if any of the attackers were harmed, Bilbo and Ori's lives would be forfeited."

"We may not be able to beat the answer out of our suspects, but we can still send someone to follow them," Balin suggested calmly. "Hopefully, they will lead us to their base of operation."

"Guards! Someone, anyone! I need help, please!" Bilbo's screams of distress cut through the peace of the morning. He pounded his fists desperately against its wooden surface and hollered again, "Please, I need help!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming, quit your hollering!" a voice roared back. Bilbo obediently stepped away from the entrance at the sound of jingling keys, and a few seconds later, the door swung open inwards.

"What? What do you want?" their attacker, the large one with a heavily swollen nose, snarled as he kicked the door closed behind him. In the dimly lit room, Bilbo could make out the pronounced bags under the man's eyes and the sad, dishevelled state of his clothes and hair. The latter was probably from being jolted awake by the ruckus that Bilbo had caused, and the Hobbit clamped down the vindictive smile that he could feel blooming across his face.

Instead, he clenched his fists and pursed his lips into a thin frown. "I-It's my friend," he stammered, letting his eyes go wide with fright, "I tried to wake him up just now and I couldn't."

The man gave Bilbo a terrifying glare, roughly pushed the Hobbit aside and he trudged across the room until he stood towering over Ori. The Dwarf was unconscious in a dark corner, curled pathetically on his side in a foetal position with his back towards the room. His face was drawn tight in pain and he was breathing shallowly, as if he was struggling to draw enough air into his lungs.

"Oy! Wake up," the man nudged Ori with his foot. When the Dwarf did not respond, he nudged him again, harder this time. "Oy! Can you hear me? I said wake up!"

"H-he was a bit warm to the touch," Bilbo said meekly. He peered at his friend nervously from behind the man. "I think it might be his leg. He was wounded there. I cleaned it earlier but I think it might be infected."

Sighing loudly in aggravation, the man crouched heavily on one knee and he reached for Ori's shoulder, all the while muttering unhappily under his breath.

He did not notice the wooden plank rushing towards him until it crashed heavily into the back of his skull.

The ferocious howl of pain startled Bilbo so much that he froze in terror, the plank still clutched in his hands in a death grip, but in the next split second, his instincts kicked back into action. He swung wildly again, bringing the wooden plank over his kidnapper's head a second, a third, a fourth time, a *fifth* time, barely registering the loud thuds from each connecting blow until the man crashed over on to his side, limbs askew and unmoving.

Breathing heavily, Bilbo stood over his attacker's prone body with his wooden plank raised threateningly in the air, ready for another go if the man so much as *twitch*. Ori stared up at him from the ground, eyes wide and mouth gaping.

"By the Makers, Bilbo," the Dwarf said in a strangled voice, "what happened to our plan, 'less bashing, more sneaking'?"

Bilbo tentatively lowered his weapon with shaking arms. He could feel his heart pounding away in his chest. "I...I may have gotten a bit carried away there," he said, choking back the wild, nervous laughter that threatened to bubble up his throat. Dear Eru, he had just bludgeoned a man with a piece of wood! He had bludgeoned him repeatedly and savagely *with a piece of floor board*. How was this his life? "I think he might have alerted – "

"Beren!" a familiar voice called out, "What're you doin' down there? You better not be beating those prisoners, at least not without me! I have a score to settle with that pissant little Dwarf!"

Bilbo and Ori leapt into action. Working like a well-oiled machine, Ori grabbed his own wooden plank that he had kept on the floor beside him while Bilbo searched their felled enemy for the set of keys to their locked door.

"Beren, you great fat lug! Don't make me come down there! The esteem leader's not gonna be happy if he hears that you've been messin' around while he's gone."

Ori pressed himself against the wall right beside the door and motioned for Bilbo to do the same. "On my mark," he whispered and the Hobbit nodded as he fumbled for the right key to fit into the key hole. On his third try, the lock clicked open.

"That's it, ya bastard! I'm coming down! I don't care what you do to that Halfling but leave the Dwarf alone." A dark chuckle followed, "I have plans for him and I want him to be awake for 'em."

Bilbo held his breath, listening intently at the heavy footsteps that descended the creaking stairs. The mumbled cursing that accompanied them grew louder and louder.

Finally, there was a pause. "Oy!" the voice called out clearly from behind the door, "I'm coming in!"

Ori nodded and Bilbo immediately yanked the door open.

"What the – " Aldor had just enough time to look up from the keys that he had in his hands before Ori viciously brought his wooden plank over his head in a powerful blow. The hit sent the short man stumbling backwards and his head cracked sharply against the wall behind him. He slid down the wall, crumbling into himself like a marionette with its strings cut, until he lay in a boneless, silent heap on the floor.

Bilbo and Ori quickly reached over to haul their kidnapper by his legs and arms.

"That went much better than planned!" Bilbo grunted. For such a short, skeletal-looking man, he was surprisingly heavy. "How are you doing, by the way?"

"Good, good!" Ori answered brightly, huffing slightly from the weight. "Glad to know that the bashing plan worked!" Together, they dropped the man none-too-gently beside his large companion and quickly rifled through their kidnappers' pockets.

"Found a knife, I think this was yours," Bilbo said, tossing the item over to his friend.

"I found the rest of your buttons!" Ori held out a little pouch and jingled it in Bilbo's direction. "That greedy drunk had it with him this whole time! Oh, I also found a knife for you!"

Bilbo took the knife and the buttons with a quick thanks and, upon having second thought, grabbed the set of extra keys out of Aldor's hands. "Alright, I'm off to do some investigating," he got up and dusted himself off. "Will you be alright here by yourself? I left the key still in the lock if you'll be needing one yourself."

"I'll be fine," Ori answered distractedly. His fingers moved deftly as he went through the considerable amount of pouches that were attached to Aldor's belt. "Come find me once you've found a way out!"

With a final wave of goodbye, Bilbo reached into his pocket and slipped on his ring. He watched as the vivid colours around him disappeared in a rush, leaving in its place a dim world of ominous shadows and muted sounds. Bilbo shivered lightly. No matter how many times he had used the ring, he could never get used to the eeriness of his monochrome surroundings and the pervasive, unnatural cold that seeped through his clothes and into his bones.

Get a hold of yourself Bilbo Baggins, he thought, clenching his fists tightly. *Ori depends on you to do your part*.

Nodding to himself, Bilbo gathered his courage and strode out the room, closing the door gently on his way out. He squinted at his wispy surrounding as his eyes slowly adjusted to the bizarre, greyscale landscape around him; from what he could see, he was in a tiny hallway with a set of narrow, wooden staircase immediately to his left. At the top of the stairs were another set of doors, and Bilbo breathed a sigh of relief when he noticed a crack of light streaming through the partially opened door.

"Easy does it," he muttered to himself, and he began his slow climb up the stairs. He kept his back pressed tightly against the wall and his steps light, wincing with every creak of the old, rotting wood beneath his feet that bent under his weight. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, Bilbo could feel the sweat in his palms and his heart hammering away in his chest.

You're doing good, Bilbo. Just keep your focus.

He breathed a few deep, calming breaths to regain his sense of equilibrium before feeling brave enough to lean forward and squint through the crack. It was difficult to see through the narrow gap, but Bilbo could barely make out what looked to be another hallway. The Hobbit pressed his ear against the door to listen for any footsteps.

Everything was silent.

Huh, I wonder if the place is deserted, Bilbo thought, suspicious but grateful by the peacefulness of his surroundings. He had to admit that he was facing an unusual stroke of good luck, first with how smoothly the attackers were dispatched and now with meeting no resistance on his way up the stairs. If his luck holds up, Bilbo and Ori might be able to escape completely unnoticed.

Feeling emboldened by the thought, Bilbo cracked the door further open and slipped through the entrance. He found himself standing at the end of a dimly-lit, but thankfully empty, hallway that stretched before him, and his eyes automatically flitted around to take in all the details. Like the basement where he and Ori were kept imprisoned, half-rotted wood lined the floor and the walls of this new space, adding to the pungent, wet smell of mildew in the air. There were some attempts to fix the wear and tear in this area; Bilbo could see several patches of newly installed wall paneling from the way that the light colour of the new wood had contrasted vividly against the surrounding planks. The hallway was also devoid of furnishing save for a few crates that were used as makeshift candle stands and a fraying, raggedy piece of cloth – a carpet, if Bilbo could even call it that – that draped along the length of the corridor.

As pathetic as this location was, Bilbo was still happier to be standing there with its half dilapidated walls than to face the dreary, damp chill of Thranduil's ominous dungeon. He supposed he should give the Elves credit. Compared to the Men, they were much better at giving their prisoners a more miserable time. *Then again,* Bilbo mused, *the Elves had all the time in the world to perfect it.*

Bilbo gingerly continued his exploration. The hallway only contained two other points of exit aside from the door to the basement, one on the left and one on the right. Bilbo ducked into the doorway to the left, which happened to be the one

closest to him, and he immediately recoiled from the strong stench of alcohol and sweat.

By the Valars, what is going on in here?

He wrinkled his nose in distaste and carefully backed away until he was leaning against the doorframe. The room was a disgusting mess of filth, and the first and most obvious thing that Bilbo could see was the piles of blankets, dirty clothing, half-empty mugs of ale, and all manners of trash that were strewn about the space. Buried under this mess were cots, half-made ones that had Bilbo itching to tidy them up, that were pressed up against the walls to allow for as much walking room between them as possible. A neat little square window sat on the wall across from him, but the wooden shutters were drawn shut, further casting the space in stifling darkness.

This must be their bunker! These Men are living in a pigsty! Bilbo thought, aghast. Even Fíli and Kíli had a more organized room and they have a habit of hiding mincemeat pie under their beds.

Shaking his head in mild disgust, Bilbo left the room for the last unexplored door in the hallway. He poked his head through the entrance and to his surprise, he was greeted by an open, welcoming space that held none of the unpleasantness of the bunker. Large, open windows lined the walls from which the bright morning sun streamed into the room, bathing everything in a soft, golden glow. The feeling of warm sunlight hitting against his face instantly brought a new sense of peace in Bilbo's heart and for the first time since he woke up in his cell, the Hobbit felt the lingering feelings of unease dissipate like smoke in the air.

Bilbo shook his head ruefully. He was getting distracted and he really could not afford to do that, not when Ori was waiting for him.

Sighing quietly, Bilbo picked his way around the room, navigating between the mismatched, wooden chairs that lay scattered randomly throughout the area while he stuck as close as he could to the walls. There were two new doors that were connected to this space, one across the room from him and the other to his right, but aside from that, there really wasn't anything else of interest. Still, Bilbo found himself hesitating to leave. Compared to all the other places that he had visited so far, (*especially that vile bunker*, Bilbo added in his head), this was much less dreary and much better aired out.

He was especially grateful for the latter.

Focus, Bilbo, focus! he reminded himself harshly for the umpteenth time that day even as he tiptoed to the door on his right. He pressed his ear against its wooden surface and upon hearing no sound, he leaned forward and pushed gently against the door.

To his surprise, it did not swing open.

Bilbo cursed under his breath and pushed harder still. When the door would not budge at all, he dug his heals into the ground and tried again, using his shoulder to apply more force. The old wood creaked lightly at the newly added pressure but again, it did not move.

The Hobbit heaved an exasperated sigh and gave up. He still had another door to try so he might as well see if he could open that one instead. With his mind made up, he took several brisk steps towards it, but a flash of movement caught his attention just before he could make it halfway across the room. Bilbo spun around, his eyes glancing out the window and his heart stopped.

Haldan was standing right outside, staring suspiciously back at Bilbo through the open window.

Startled, Bilbo involuntarily took a step back and to his horror, the floor board creaked loudly behind him. He quickly slapped his hands over his mouth to muffle his surprised yelp.

"Hello?" Haldan called out, "Aldor? Beren? Is that you?"

Bilbo stared back with wide eyes. *Please go away, please go away, please go away.*

Haldan swept his eyes around the room, frowning in confusion. "Aldor? Beren? Are you in there?" he asked again and waited a few more seconds for any response. "Come now, I heard you walking about. Stop joking around." Bilbo could only stay standing in his spot as he kept repeating the mantra in his head, hoping that Haldan could not hear his heavy breathing.

Finally, after what felt like a small eternity had passed, Haldan shrugged and shouted out, "Alright, I'm going to be out here in the front to tend to the horses before Mallor and Galion get back. Come find me if you need anything!"

What did he mean, 'before Mallor and Galion get back'?

Bilbo slowly craned his neck to follow Haldan's line of movement. He watched the advisor stalk away from the window and he waited a full minute after the man was well and truly out of sight.

Then, he promptly bolted for the basement.

Mallor and Galion are not in the house, his mind screamed at him in realization. *There is no one else in the house!*

"Ori!" he whispered harshly through the cell door while yanking the ring off his finger, "we need to move, now! There's no one else in the house!"

The door creaked open and Ori immediately slipped through the open gap. "What?" he whispered back disbelievingly.

"Come on, we have to go!" Bilbo nimbly climbed up the stairs and Ori, bless the quick thinking Dwarf, followed his cue without missing a beat.

They made their way into the hallway in a fraction of the time that it took Bilbo to explore the place, foregoing stealth altogether for speed. Bilbo ushered the Dwarf into the disgusting bunker, his mind drawing up an escape plan as he closed the door shut behind them. "There is a window on the wall in front of you," he said in a rush. "Do you see the shutters? If we can get those to open, we can climb through."

Ori nodded and together, the Hobbit and the Dwarf pushed against the large wooden panels with their combined force.

They were not expecting the shutters to come clean off its rusted hinges, falling outwards onto the grass in a muffled crash.

Bilbo and Ori cringed at the unintentional destruction. "That – that'll do," Bilbo cleared his throat and promptly clambered through the open window, using a nearby upturned crate as a step on his way out. Ori followed, deftly jumping over the ledge.

They landed ungracefully on the grass in an uncoordinated mess of flailing limbs. Somewhere in the back of Bilbo's mind, he was infinitely glad that Thorin was not there to witness this humiliating event. He could almost hear the Dwarven king's low, rumbling laughter as he offered to carry Bilbo down like he had done whenever the Hobbit gave his talks in the farms from his makeshift platform.

"I have no idea how Nori can make this look so easy," Ori winced. He rubbed at his bruised flank, "Where do we go next?"

Bilbo opened his mouth to answer but Haldan's angry voice cut through the clearing: "Beren, Aldor! Just what are you doing in there? What is all that noise?"

Bilbo and Ori scrambled to their feet with a renewed sense of fear coursing through their veins. "This way!" Bilbo said urgently, pointing to the direction where he could faintly make out the sound of a roaring river, and without further ado, they broke into a mad dash to freedom.

They did not stop running until their limbs felt numb and their lungs burned.

"This...this is insane!" Ori panted out once they had settled by a cluster of trees to rest. He had to be uncomfortable, sitting as we was on the protruding roots of a large oak while his back was pressed against the peeling tree bark, but Bilbo doubted Ori cared at the moment. The Dwarf looked like he was happy just from being able to *breathe*.

At least the Dwarf had the decency to find a somewhat shielded spot to recover. Bilbo had altogether given up on crawling to a nearby tree and instead, opted to collapse face first on the grass.

"Bilbo? Are you alright?"

Bilbo grunted once. He might have also made a vague hand gesture to go with the grunt. He wasn't too sure.

"I can't believe we managed to pull that off!" Ori exclaimed, still breathing heavily but he could at least form coherent sentences now. Bilbo tried not to hate his friend a little for that. "We clubbed a man – two, actually – stole their items, *broke* a window and escaped through it!" The scribe pressed his palms over his eyes and laughed incredulously. "*We outburgled the burglars!*"

That earned a sharp bark of laughter from Bilbo and he rolled over on to his back to grin at Ori. "Technically, they stole from us first! Besides, we mostly just took back our stolen items. Mostly."

"I took all of their gold," Ori confessed in a hush as his eyes lit up mischievously. "And also, this flask of whiskey," he fished out a small metal flask from his pocket and tossed it to the ground beside Bilbo. "I stole it from the drunk as an added insult to injury."

Bilbo broke into helpless laughter. Honestly, who would have thought that Ori had it in him to be vindictive? "Does Nori know that you've been learning all these tricks from him?" he asked teasingly. With a small grunt, he sat up, reached for the metal flask and shook it a little. A half-full flask. Not bad at all.

Ori pulled himself off the tree and lumbered over to Bilbo to sit beside him. "Nori taught me a few tricks. I improvised the rest," he admitted, his voice suddenly shy.

"Well, you did good!" Bilbo handed the flask back to Ori and gave the Dwarf a cheeky wink. "Trust me, I'm a hired professional." Ori snorted but Bilbo could see the growing smile on his face.

"Alright, come on! No more dawdling." Bilbo grudgingly got to his feet and offered his hand to pull his friend up. "We should be able to hit the river in no time!"

A few minutes later, Bilbo was thoroughly berating himself for the lack of planning beyond 'running towards the river' as they stood on a small wooden dock by the riverbank, watching the rapid, churning water below them.

"Now, what can we do?" Ori asked, looking very much frustrated. Bilbo could fully empathize. They haven't made it this far only to be stopped now.

Sighing, Bilbo ran his hand through his tangled curls. "We can't turn back around. Haldan and his men are probably looking for us and they have horses. We won't be able to out run them...unless," Bilbo's gaze slid behind Ori, his eyes widening at the neat stack of barrels that were sitting at the edge of the dock.

A neat stack of *empty* barrels.

Ori followed Bilbo's gaze and he paled when he realized just what Bilbo had in mind.

"It's the fastest way to get to Lake-town," Bilbo started to explain, hoping to do some damage control, but Ori only paled even further, "The river will take us downstream."

"Oh no. No, no, no, no!" Ori shook his head vehemently. "We are not doing this again! I am not going back into a barrel!" He crossed his arms defensively and planted his foot down in a show of unbending stubbornness, "I am not going into a barrel and there is nothing you can do about it. You shan't make me!"

"AAARRGHHHHHHHH!"

"Ori, for crying out loud, it's not that bad! Just keep breathing and you'll be fine!"

"AAAAAARRRGHHHHHHHH!"

"Think of the bright side! At least we're not being fired at by the Elves!

"ARRRRRGHHH! ARGHHHHHHHH!"

"Hang on! The rapids are coming up! This is going to be messy!"

"AAAAAAARRRRGGHHHHHHHH!"

It was only through his century-long friendship with Thorin that kept Dwalin standing beside his king for the entire duration of his morning meeting with Bard. This was not to say that he had not thought about abandoning his station to track down Mallor and give the man the beating of his life, and Mahal help that poor bastard because a beating is the least he deserved, but Dwalin was able to reign in his desire to act rashly. Still, the thought was a nice one and if nothing else, the flood of anger that followed it chased away any feelings of weariness from the sleepless night that he had.

"I have sent some of my men into Lake-town to search for Mister Haldar while the rest are searching in the wilderness," a visibly tired-looking Bard informed Thorin an hour into the meeting, flanked by his equally groggy advisors. "Unfortunately, that means that I do not have any people to spare for Mister Mallor and Mister Galion."

Bard and his group of loyal followers had arrived to the Dwarven camp just after the sun has risen, asking to speak to the king in private. Luckily for everyone involved, none of the Company members had truly slept, least of all the king who had spent the night pacing back and forth in his tent, and it was through this reason that a meeting could be immediately arranged where the Men were promptly informed of the Company's newest findings.

"If I may offer a solution, your Majesties, we can use the Ravens. They can keep track of the two suspects from the air without anyone else noticing," Balin said almost serenely. He was the only one who was visibly unaffected by the thick cloud of tension that hung above everyone in the room.

Balin's ability to maintain his calm façade was one of the things that Dwalin had hated and envied in equal parts. It drove the warrior insane during their arguments where his elder brother could verbally decimate him without so much as raising his tone, leaving Dwalin to trip over his tongue and flounder pathetically in his rage. Now, he could not be more grateful for his brother's unflappable nature. Upon hearing the reasonable suggestion, both kings not only visibly relaxed, but they were more than happy to go along with the plan, and with a final promise to keep each other informed of any new developments, the meeting was adjourned.

"Majesty," Dwalin greeted and he automatically marched into place by Thorin's right side the moment his king left the meeting tent. He gave a quick nod to Balin who was trailing behind them before turning back to Thorin. "What are we doing next?"

Thorin sighed and rubbed at his tired eyes. It was a testimony to the deep trust that he held for Dwalin to show even this small amount of weakness. "Balin and I will be checking on my nephews to see if they have received any news from the Ravens or from Nori. Afterwards, I will need to speak to Dáin and Glóin about the current situation in Erebor. Hopefully, the Dwarves in the camp are none the wiser about what is going on."

Last night, once everyone had resettled themselves in Thorin's tent, Balin had brought up the importance of keeping Bilbo and Ori's disappearances a secret from the rest of the camp.

"If any of the Dwarves know about this kidnapping, it will be very likely that they take it upon themselves to rescue Bilbo and Ori," the advisor had wisely explained. "The last thing that we need is for a vigilante to throw our careful planning into jeopardy and to put Bilbo and Ori's lives in danger."

Although the idea of having to pretend that everything was normal chafed Dwalin as much as it did everyone else, they could all understand the necessity to keep this charade running.

"Do you have any plans then?" Dwalin had asked Balin rather brusquely, but his older brother was more than familiar with Dwalin's gruff demeanour than to take any offense.

Instead, Balin had simply stroked his beard and replied, "As a matter of fact, I do."

Before the night was out, each of the Dwarves was given specific roles to fill: the brothers Ur, Glóin and Óin would resume their jobs to minimize the suspicion that anything was wrong within the Company, Dáin would act in Thorin's stead to oversee the reconstruction in Erebor, Nori would continue his undercover mission to find out more about the other kidnappers, and Fíli and Kíli would keep a look out for any messages from the Ravens. That left Balin, Dori, Thorin and Dwalin with the task to gather what news they could get from the two princes and use those to design a suitable rescue plan.

It was not a perfect setup, and Dwalin already found himself feeling restless from having to sit around, anticipating over the arrival of any news, but the warrior supposed that it was better than having everyone collectively panic in a large group.

"You should get some rest, Dwalin."

Dwalin jerked back into attention at Thorin's quietly spoken words. He shook his head. "Can't sleep. Too much going on in my head."

He did not tell Thorin that every time he had closed his eyes, he could see his beloved's glassy, vacant eyes staring lifelessly back at Dwalin. The heavy, suffocating sense of loss and regret that would inevitably follow was almost more than he could bear, and he could not stop thinking what he could have done to prevent the kidnapping in the first place. If only he had been a bit smarter, then he would have known to accompany Ori and Bilbo to the farm. If only he had kept better vigilance, then those perpetrators would not have had the chance to strike. *If only, if only, if only –*

Dwalin forced the thought away into the recesses of his mind where he could no longer see *Ori*, *hurt and bleeding*, but from Thorin's soft answering look, he had done a poor job in disguising his attempt. "If you can't sleep, then wait for me in my tent while I see to my errands." The king raised a hand to stop Dwalin's rebuttal, "I need someone whom I can trust to receive any messages that might be delivered there. At the moment, Master Dori is posted at my tent."

Dwalin immediately understood what his king was hinting at: *Keep an eye on Dori in case a message about Ori gets to the tent.*

"Your Majesty," the warrior bowed lightly to Thorin. *Message received.* Thorin leaned closer and clapped him on the shoulder one last time before stalking away, his back straight and his steps confident.

Dwalin's trip back to Thorin's tent was largely uneventful, and he barely noticed the wide berth that the Dwarves on the dirt path had given him, so distracted and angry he was from his thoughts surrounding this kidnapping. According to the original ransom letter, they had three days to drop off the gold at the specified delivery site after which they would be informed where to go to find Ori and Bilbo. Dwalin doubted the kidnappers' words. Who's to say that they would not simply run off with the gold without keeping their end of the bargain, never to be heard of again? The kidnappers might have also held an animosity towards the Dwarves, which would not surprise Dwalin since his people were not known to be the friendliest, and as a last insult to Erebor, they would murder their captives in some twisted form of retribution. Or maybe, the kidnappers simply decided that killing their hostages was a quicker, easier way out of this mess after they had received the gold. There were too many different possibilities that Dwalin could not predict.

"Mister Dwalin, if you scowl any more ferociously, you would send every last Dwarf around you running home, screaming."

Dwalin looked up, his thoughts interrupted for the second time that day, to find Dori sitting on a bench right by the entrance to Thorin's tent. To any passerby, the Dwarf seemed like his normal, stuffy self. His hair and clothing were a far cry from the previous evening's dishevelled state, and he had a small tea set with empty cups on a wooden platter that was set aside on the seat beside him.

Any Dwarf who did not know where to look would not have noticed anything out of ordinary, but Dwalin could spot the hints that something was amiss. He could see how the eldest Ri brother's collar was wrinkled, his silver braids tied looser than how he usually sported them, the way his hands shook slightly when he poured out his tea...

"Master Dori," Dwalin cleared his throat and greeted, his voice gruff. "I was not expecting to see you out here."

Dori snorted dryly. "I'm hardly going to stay trapped in the king's tent after spending the night there, and I suspect that I will be spending even more time in that blasted space once he is back from his duties." He picked up his mug and blew away the rising steam, "I might as well take this opportunity to get some fresh air."

The conversation trailed off into an awkward silence. Dwalin shifted uneasily on his spot. Now what?

Dori rolled his eyes. "Would you like to take a seat, Mister Dwalin?" he asked as he gestured at the spot near the end of the bench beside the tea set.

Dwalin could recognize an order for what it was, disguised or otherwise, and he did what his instincts told him to do: he sat down quickly if not a little stiffly.

The uncomfortable silence returned with a vengeance, and Dwalin glanced over to Dori with the corner of his eyes. The Dwarf was calmly sipping on his tea, staring out onto the road at the hustle and bustle of the busy morning. He looked like he was perfectly content in ignoring the warrior's presence.

Dwalin doubted that Thorin had meant to force him into such an uncomfortable situation when he had given him that order to guard Dori, but the warrior could not help but resent his king a little.

It wasn't until Dori had drained his cup before he finally spoke up again, "You are not a Dwarf of many words, are you Master Dwalin?" Reaching for the pot to top off his own cup, he paused suddenly as if he had just remembered something important. "Now where are my manners? Would you like some tea?"

Dwalin glanced down at the tea set and furrowed his brows at the second cup on the tray. "You have brought two cups," he blurted out instead, "were you expecting visitors?"

Dori's hand jolted a little in mid-pour and Dwalin internally winced. There was a reason why he didn't talk much and one of them was his knee-jerk reaction of putting his foot in his mouth.

"I tend to have my morning tea with Ori so I am used to preparing a pot for two people," Dori explained, his voice stilted. He handed the cup to Dwalin, who accepted it with a polite 'Thank you'. "Old habits die hard and I find myself mistakenly taking a second cup. It wasn't until later that I..." He choked off his sentence, looking more and more visibly upset. Dwalin took an awkward sip of tea and wisely averted his eyes.

"I must admit," Dori began after taking a few moments to compose himself, "I did not peg you as the type who would enjoy tea."

"I don't," Dwalin grunted. Then, having realized that his curt answer was a bit rude, he fumbled to elaborate further. "That is to say, I don't like most tea except peppermint. And even that is a recently developed taste."

"It is Ori's favourite," Dori nodded. "I suppose you picked that up from him."

Dwalin made a non-committal noise. "And he picked that up from you. He speaks about you often. It is obvious that you mean the world to him."

Dori rolled his eyes. "No need to flatter me, Mister Dwalin. I know full well that I am not the only brother that Ori has. Not to mention, I doubt I can measure up to the great Master Dwalin." The look he gave to the warrior was a meaningful one tinged with bitterness.

"You're right, he has Nori as well," Dwalin agreed readily, ignoring the growing resentment on the other Dwarf's face. "But Nori wasn't the one who rocked him to sleep, soothed away his nightmares, and supported his impossible dream to be a scribe when no one else would." Dwalin shook his head and placed his mug of tea back on the platter. "Nori may be his second brother and Ori may wish to know more about him, but you're the clear favourite. You always have been."

Dwalin rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously and continued, "As for me, Master Dori, I have no intention to compete with you for your position in Ori's heart. For one, he loves us both differently and I would never force him to choose between myself and his kin. Secondly, if he did have to choose between us for some reason, I fear that I will lose to you."

Dori could do nothing but gape at him for a few seconds. "Yes, well...I," he spluttered at a loss for words. He ducked his head and took a quick sip of his tea.

There was one more thing that Dwalin wanted to say and it has been gnawing at him for some time now. *Might as well spit it out now,* Dwalin thought, steeling his mind to face what he will do next. *Here goes nothing.* Clenching his fists over his lap, he breathed in shakily and blurted out, "I would also like to ask your permission to formally court Ori."

Dori promptly spat his tea out violently. "I...you...*what*?" he coughed out.

"I understand that Nori has accepted my first courting present for Ori already, but I would still like to receive your blessing." Dwalin hoped that he was making any sort of sense. He was so focused on getting the truth out at the moment that he wasn't paying attention to how it was being delivered."I also apologize for any offense that I may have caused you with my delay. I realized that I should have asked you sooner, but truth to be told, Master Dori, you are a terrifying Dwarf."

The eldest Ri was not so easily swayed. He lowered his mug on to the wooden tray, crossed his arms, and scowled. "What happens if I say no?"

"I would have done my best to prove myself worthy of Ori's hand in courtship no matter how long it took," Dwalin answered solemnly. "I suspect that Ori might object to the wait and do something rash beforehand, but I will prove it to you or anyone who doubts my affections for as long as Ori allows it."

"That boy has a stubborn streak a mile wide and once he made his decision, nothing can change his mind from it," Dori muttered unhappily. Dwalin wasn't sure if that meant that he was happy with his answer or not. However, his shoulders had loosened from its defensive posture, and Dwalin supposed that that was a good sign.

Dori took a deep drink from his mug before he continued his muttering, "It was like that with his wish to become a scribe and again, when he insisted on joining Thorin's Company. Neither Nori nor I could talk any sense into him. 'I don't want to stay in boring Blue Mountains,' he said! Pah!"

Dwalin found himself inexplicably smiling. "I know," he said fondly. "He had it in his head that I was not warm enough and made it his personal mission to rectify this problem. I tried to convince him that I was fine. He wouldn't have it."

"Oh? And what did he do?"

"He knitted me twenty nine items. Among them were nineteen pieces of clothing." Dwalin fingered the cuffs of his gloves that Ori had recently given him. Never in a million years could he have ever predicted that he would be spoiled rotten with gifts.

Dori let out a bark of laughter. "Of course he would! If there is one thing that Ori has in spades aside from bloody stubbornness, it's passion. He also is a bit of an overachiever!" Dwalin hummed in agreement at that, but he was not surprised. These were the things about Ori that he had learned during the journey and he suspected that they were what attracted him to the scribe in the first place.

A bout of silence followed as each Dwarf thought about what had been said. Dwalin was beginning to hope that Dori and he could resolve their differences without resorting to physical blows. So far, they had done miraculously well.

That did not mean that he had stopped dreading how this conversation would continue, especially when Dori's next question was a seemingly random one. "Why?"

"Why what?" Dwalin asked with trepidation.

"Why Ori?"

Why Ori indeed. Dwalin had a million and one reasons in his mind, yet he could not even begin to answer the question with clarity. If he were to open his mouth right now to respond, his answer would only pour out as a jumbled mess of words, and he doubted that Dori would appreciate his lack of coherence. Still, it was important that he did not spend too much time silently dwelling on what to say least his affections were accused of being insincere.

"Because he is the bravest Dwarf that I know," Dwalin started slowly, "Kind to a fault, smart as a whip, stubborn as a mule, he doesn't put up with my nonsense." *He also has the most beautiful smile that knocks the breath from my body.* "He's got a loyal heart, and he's one of the rare few Dwarves who's not afraid to be honest with me." *I've never felt more at peace with myself than when I have him beside me.* "He makes me want to be a better Dwarf. He makes me want to be happy." *I would wish for nothing more if I can do the same for him.*

Dori has gone completely silent. Dwalin watched him take a slow sip out of his mug, obviously contemplating on his words, and in the lingering stillness between them, the warrior realized just how loud his hammering heartbeat was. Dwalin had never felt more afraid in his life than in that moment. Funny how facing endless waves of Orcs could not compare to the terror of having one's heart laid out in the open.

Finally, Dori turned to glare at Dwalin. "You will take care of him," he said sternly.

"With everything that I have and until my last breath leaves my body," Dwalin swore softly. "Master Dori, I love him."

Dori did not smile, but his eyes had softened just a little at the hushed confession. Then, his usual, disgruntled expression was back on his face. "Master Dwalin," he began in a crisp tone, "it is usually a Ri family tradition to at least have Sunday brunches together. Unfortunately, this has been pushed aside what with the adventure and Erebor's reconstruction. I hope to reintroduce it."

He gave the warrior a no-nonsense look that had Dwalin nervously shifting in his seat. "You *will* be coming over for brunch next week. Eleven o'clock sharp at my tent. *Do not be late*."

Dwalin was so stunned that he could only nod back stiffly.

"Good." Satisfied, Dori got up and brushed the invisible dust off of his clothing. "You know, I think I've got my fair share of fresh air. Please feel free to finish the tea, Master Dwalin. I shall collect the tray once you are done." And with a final nod, he spun around and ducked into the tent's entrance.

Dwalin was left to stare after him with a rapidly growing smile on his face. When Thorin and Balin found him hours later, he was still smiling.

Bilbo and Ori resurfaced with a loud splash, coughing the cold river water from their lungs.

"Never – never again!" Ori spluttered out as he scrambled to keep himself afloat by flinging his arms over the barrel that was bobbing up and down in the water on its side. Somewhere along their trip down the River Running, the barrel had flipped, throwing the Dwarf out of the wretched wooden death trap. Bilbo, who was clinging on to the outside, just barely kept his grip on the makeshift boat.

"Never again," Bilbo agreed with a groan. He adjusted his hold on the barrel, freeing one of his hands so that he could brush away his wet hair from his eyes with his numb fingers. "I think I swallowed enough water to last a lifetime."

"I think I will be happy to never see this horrible place ever again," Ori added vehemently. He coughed a few more times to clear out his lungs before he could say, "We can't stay afloat here. Which way do you reckon is Lake-town?"

Bilbo craned his head as far as he could and looked around his surroundings. They were stuck in the middle of a vast body of water that stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see. Immediately surrounding them was a myriad of other floating debris, none larger than the barrel that they were holding on to. It was hard to distinguish which way is which among the chaos, and the only tell that Bilbo could use was by watching the river flow.

"That way is upriver so...I guess we keep paddling in the opposite direction, which is that way?" He pointed to his right. He hoped they would find somewhere to land soon. Maybe their good luck from earlier on would carry them all the way home.

Thirty minutes later, they were still trapped in the water with no other visible landmark in sight. Bilbo had to admit to himself that their good luck had finally run out.

"O-Ori, h-how are you doing?" Bilbo asked between chattering teeth. He did not remember feeling this cold in the water the last time that they had taken the barrel ride down the River Running.

Ori frowned heavily in concern, "Bilbo, you're shaking like a leaf!" Gripping to the barrel, he immediately made his way to Bilbo's side and boldly wrapped an arm around the Hobbit, ignoring his squeak of protest. "Keep close, we need to preserve our warmth," Ori explained as he tucked his friend closer to him.

"O-oh," Bilbo blinked in surprise at Ori's quick thinking. Frankly, he felt a bit embarrassed for not coming up with that solution sooner. His mind must be addling from this cursed cold.

"We need to get out of this water before we freeze to death," the Dwarf muttered unhappily. The warmth of his breath brushed softly against Bilbo's chilled cheek and it sent him shivering all the harder.

"There's n-nothing around us that we c-can use like a raft?"

"None that I can see, unfortunately," Ori replied. He tightened his hold on Bilbo and spun around to have a better look, pausing every now and then to squint towards the horizon.

Suddenly, he stopped moving. "Wait," he said in a hush, "I think I saw something move in the distance."

Bilbo perked his head up. "What? What is it?"

"I...I'm not sure, I can't quite make out what it is," Ori trailed off, squinting all the harder. Bilbo turned to where the Dwarf was looking and scanned the water, but before he could make much headway, Ori tensed beside him. "I think I see it!" Ori exclaimed with growing excitement. "It's a boat, Bilbo! A boat!"

Bilbo's eyes widened. "Wait, are you sure?"

"Positive! It's a boat, a small one but a boat nonetheless!"

Bilbo let out a whoop of pure joy. "We're saved! We're saved!" Ever so gently, he peeled himself away from Ori and started to wave his arms frantically at the boat. "Oy! Over here! We need help! Over here!"

"It's coming our way!" Ori cried out happily before joining Bilbo's attempt to flag down the ship. "Over here! Help! Please, we need help!"

They did not stop shouting until the boat was close enough to cast a fishing net over them.

"What do you suppose everyone's reaction will be when they see us?" Bilbo asked as he shifted to allow Ori more space from their perch inside the net. They were slowly being pulled out of the frigid water and already, the Hobbit could feel pins and needles in his limbs. He brought his hands over his mouth and warmed them with his breath.

"Probably a lot of disbelief," Ori answered cheerily. He wringed the hem of his tunic to get the excess water out. "I just hope that my brothers or Dwalin haven't killed each other. I fully expect them to have broken into several fist fights."

"Yes, it would be a shame if anything happened to your beau Dwalin," Bilbo teased with a large smirk on his face. "Oho, what is this? Are you blushing?"

Ori quickly buried his face into his hands to hide his flush. "Shut up, Bilbo," he mumbled, but he sounded more mortified than truly offended. "I'll have you know that you of all people should not be making fun of me, what with you and the king's ongoing romance – "

"A romance that you've done beautifully to illustrate in those pamphlets! Thank you for reminding me!" Bilbo nudged teasingly at Ori with his shoulder when the Dwarf groaned. "What I am particularly interested in is that third image, the one where Thorin and I were locked in a desperate – "

Bilbo never got to finish that sentence as their net dropped to the ground without warning, sending the Dwarf and the Hobbit crashing against the boat's hard, wooden deck.

"Oof!" his back connected to the floor with a thud and he felt the wind knocked out of him. Temporarily dazed and more than slightly panicked, Bilbo managed to struggle weakly against his net, further tangling his arms and legs. Ori wasn't faring any better; he was thrashing violently against his bonds but he was as stuck as Bilbo was.

"Oy, what's the meaning of this?" Bilbo asked, his voice shaky from the lack of breath. That fall had *hurt*. His back would probably bruise something horrible.

"The meaning, Mister Hobbit, is that we were very fortunate to come across you two, although I can't say the same for you or your friend," came a *very* familiar voice, and Bilbo immediately felt his blood freeze.

Looming above Bilbo and Ori were their captors Galion and Mallor, who looked none too please by their presence on the boat.

"Aw crap," Ori squeaked out. Bilbo cannot help but return the sentiment.

"Uncle! Uncle!" Fíli's urgent shouts jostled Thorin so badly that he immediately lunged for Orcrist, drew his sword from its scabbard and spun around to face the entrance in a fluid motion. Around him, Dwalin, Balin, and Dori had similarly dropped what they were holding to grab for their weapons.

"Uncle, we have news from the Ravens!" Fíli, with Kíli tight on his heels, burst through the entrance, wild eyed and grinning like mad men only to stop abruptly before they accidentally ran themselves through.

"Um," Kíli squeaked out, staring crossed-eyed at the gleaming blade of Balin's sword that was pointed straight at his chest.

The Dwarves collectively breathed a sigh of relief and lowered their weapons. "Sorry, laddie," Balin offered Kíli as he sheathed away his blade. "Now, what is it that you have to say?"

"We just received news from Roäc!" Fíli cried out before Kíli could get a word in. "The Ravens found Bilbo and Ori!"

Notes:

Notes:

[1] I made the assumption that the basement cell's door has a double cylinder lock (ie. it accepts a key from both sides). It's not exactly very historically accurate since a double cylinder lock is a later invention, but we'll just handwave that.

[2] Water temperature of lakes/ponds/rivers tends to be significantly colder in the Spring (which is when this story is taking place) vs. the Fall (the time when Thorin and co. rode down the river in The Hobbit). One of the reasons is because water slowly absorbs heat from the hot summer days and when Fall hits, this build up of heat have not had the chance to fully dissipate yet (until Winter sets in).

This brings us to the following point to consider: full body exposure to chilly water after a set amount of time = increased risk of hypothermia, especially if you're wearing water absorbent clothes like cotton or wool.

[3] I based off the river's temperature on the water surface temperature of Lake Ontario and Lake Eerie in April/May, and I made a very generous assumption that the river's temperature is slightly over 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit).
At this temperature, a normal person can last in the water for 1 - 2 hours until hypothermia kicks in, but other factors that can extend this time is the will to live (which Bilbo and Ori would have plenty of). I estimated that Bilbo can last in the water for approx. 2 hours while Ori can last up to 4, given that he's a Dwarf and they're built to be hardier.

Hypothermia link:
http://www.seagrant.umn.edu/coastal_communities/hypothermia#time

On to the next chapter!

Chapter 12 (http://archiveofourown.org/works/700362/chapters/1849154)

Notes:

IMPORTANT! PLEASE READ, DO NOT IGNORE!

Hi there friend! In case if you haven't noticed, I posted two new chapters (Chapters 11 and 12) at the same time, so please feel free to read Chapter 11 first if you haven't had the chance yet. ;) Many thanks!

Unedited for now. All mistakes are mine. Apologies in advance!

Fanart:
Shippingcloset has draw a series of fabulous art for Chapter 12. (https://bgtea.tumblr.com/post/102699247238/fanart-for-inevitable-chapter-12-i-received) These were a commission from a reader who wished to remain anonymous. Thank you so much for the amazing gift!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes (#chapter_12_endnotes) .)

Part XVI: Everyone, the continuation

Bilbo had spent his childhood exploring the gentle rolling hills of the Shire with his pack of Took cousins, getting into all sorts of mischief in the market and in the farmlands. As with all fearless, energetic fauntlings, they would take turns devising many elaborate make-believe adventures where they would battle monsters, uncover lost treasure, and save beautiful princesses all before supper time. If anyone were to ask Bilbo however, they would learn that the young Hobbit particularly *hated* the adventures where they had to save princesses, and it was not because he disliked them and would rather leave them to the mercy of their captors.

It was because he would almost *always* be chosen to play the damsel in distress.

The reason behind this was a simple one – Bilbo was the smallest Hobbit among his group of older, burlier cousins, and as the smallest of the group, he was given all the less desirable roles. If they were pretending to be knights, he would be the tagalong squire. If they were playing pirates, he would be the cabin boy.

If somebody needed rescuing, *he was that person*.

Being a princess was definitely not very fun at all. What he would inevitably end up doing was waste a good portion of his play time pretending to be bound and helpless. He would watch his cousins fight off whatever malevolent creature they conjured up in their imagination, and generally have a much better time than he was having.

When I grow up, I will be too big to be the princess and someone smaller will get play her instead, Bilbo had thought with the wisdom of a child.

Now, thirty to forty years after the fact, Bilbo found himself living through one of his imaginary adventures from his youth. He was *actually* bound, gagged, and being forced into riding at the front of the saddle by his towering, Mannish kidnappers at knife point. To add insult to injury, they were riding back to the very same location that Bilbo had just escaped from.

Bilbo would have found this coincidence to be funny in a sad sort of way if he was not feeling so miserable from the cold and from his newly acquired set of injuries.

"We should not have partnered up with those two idiots. Can't believe they almost lost our captives. Where the hell was Haldan when they ran?" Mallor grumbled angrily. He purposely tightened his grip on the bleeding gash on Bilbo's shoulder. The Hobbit winced at the sharp pain that ran down the length of his arm.

"Who knows!" Galion answered beside Mallor as he shifted in his own saddle. His posture was loose and relaxed, obviously smug from his success in catching Bilbo and Ori. "I'm starting to think that Haldan's no better than those two. His disappearing act got all of Bard's men in a searching frenzy! Did you see how they've swarmed Lake-town today?" He did not pay any attention to the limp, unconscious Ori that he had in front of him, or at the way that the Dwarf's dangling left arm was bent at an unnatural angle, broken.

A gust of icy wind blew through the trees and Bilbo shivered violently at the cold that clung on to his wet clothing. There wasn't much he could do to keep himself warm from his trapped position on the saddle except to lean into Mallor for body heat, but Bilbo would like to believe that he has not, and will not, lower himself to that level. Discreetly, he tried to at least shift into a more comfortable position, but a sudden throbbing ache from his lower back stole what little breath he had left in his body.

Bilbo hated to admit it, but these past two days were officially the worst ones he had lived through in his entire life, minus the events that lead up to the Battle of the Five Armies. The only thing that could make it marginally better was if he could wipe the blood off his face, a task made impossible with the way that his hands were tied behind him. He hoped he had not sustained any serious head injury aside from the bleeding, but he hadn't had the chance to check after Mallor had given him what felt like the beating of his life.

At least they did not find the ring that Bilbo had carefully hidden on his body, though the item was useless in his current predicament, not when his bound hands could not reach it.

"Didn't he have a better plan than to disappear like that? What happened?" Bilbo heard Mallor ask as if he was speaking through a great haze. He closed his eyes and forced himself to concentrate on his captor's words, pushing against the odd, floating sensation that were growing in his head beside the dull, throbbing pain.

"He pushed our plan ahead of schedule and didn't have the time to set everything up for his initial escape plan, that's what happened! It's downright sloppy work!" Galion answered back, sounding very much affronted.

"Obviously, we're clearly the smartest people on this team of dead-weights," Mallor turned towards Galion and the sudden movement jostled Bilbo's back again. The Hobbit bit down tightly on his gag to stifle his gasp of pain. "Which begs the question – why are we still working with them?"

"Can't exactly run off and do this on our own. Maybe we can ask for a larger portion of the ransom since we're the ones who salvaged this situation." Through his watering eyes, Bilbo saw Galion roughly grab Ori and reposition him on the

saddle before he could slip off. "Besides, we're going to need all the help we can get to retrieve the gold. Bard's men are crawling all over the place and it's going to be hard not to get spotted by them if we manage to get to the drop-off location."

"You honestly think they would agree to give us a larger portion of the gold?" Mallor sounded extremely sceptical. Bilbo did not need to see Galion's expression to know that he was scowling heavily in response. "And I can think of a way to kill two birds with one stone. Depends on how much you like our fellow team members though."

Shivers ran down Bilbo's spine, ones that were not caused by the pervasive cold. Mallor's dark tone was enough to cause a spike of fear to travel through the Hobbit's body, and he knew that something bad was going to happen.

"Let me put it this way," Galion purred out, "if there is a way for us to keep all of the gold, I will take it, regardless of what I have to do."

Mallor's answering laughter was full of delight, and Bilbo shivered again. "Glad to know you're on board. I've been thinking about this for the whole day. From my understanding, Bard is looking for Haldan and he won't call off his men until he finds him. I say we offer the king a helping hand." As Mallor bent forward to adjust his hold on the reins, Bilbo snapped his eyes shut at the new wave of agony that licked up his spine to the base of his neck. He bit down on his gag reflexively, worrying away the dirty fabric between his clenched teeth until the pain started to abate a little.

He must look completely incoherent to his surroundings for his captors to openly talk around him like that. Bilbo couldn't blame them; he felt like he was ready to keel over any second.

"What, you mean we just write a note to the king to tell him where to find Haldan?" Galion's confusion was palpable.

Mallor let out a deep suffering sigh. "No, you idiot, I'm saying that we let the king find Haldan's *body*." At his friend's answering silence, Mallor sighed again and began slowly, "We kill Haldan, plant the body somewhere away from our gold retrieval site, and send the king an anonymous tip to let him know where it is. It would at least get him to stop sending any more invasive search parties."

Bilbo felt his heart clench in fear. *Wait, what?*

"Ah," Galion made a noise of understanding, "but what about Beren and Aldor?"

"Oh I haven't forgotten about those two idiots," Mallor replied, pleased. "We pin the crime on them. It's easy enough. Plant something that belongs to them on the body and make sure that it's obvious. When Aldor and Beren make their trip to Lake-town, they'll be walking straight into an arrest. In the meantime, we grab the gold and run."

Bilbo's heart was pounding away in his chest as his two captors continue to openly plot the murder of their team member. Was there anything that they wouldn't do for the sake of gold? Haldan at least was honourable to an extent; he had treated Bilbo somewhat with dignity and had promised that no harm should fall on either him or Ori. (*That's probably not the case anymore given what you did to his two team members*, a little voice whispered in his head).

Still, at least Haldan proved himself to be the lesser of the (many) evils. It was definitely in Bilbo's best interest to keep Haldan alive, but how?

They may be working together but clearly, they don't all like each other, Bilbo thought, trying to think back on all the times he had spent with any of his captors during his imprisonment in his basement cell. He did not have much to go on to definitively determine who is loyal to whom, but if he were to hazard an educated guess, he would think that Haldan and the tall, bear-like Beren formed their own faction, while Mallor and Galion only liked each other. The drunk Aldor was nobody's favourite and would most likely follow the one with the most power.

Huh. Interesting.

Maybe Bilbo could use this information somehow. For the time being however, his mind was drawing a disappointing blank.

A violent shiver wracked the Hobbit's body, interrupting his stream of thoughts as all the aches and pain from his injuries flooded back in a vengeance. His heavy, waterlogged clothing only made things a thousand times worse with the way it rubbed against his bruised and cut skin. He moaned quietly into his gag, shivering hard a second time.

His mind turned to Thorin, his brave, stubborn, beautiful Thorin, whom he missed now more than ever. It just occurred to him that this was the longest time that they had spent apart since the Dwarf had showed up to his doorstep a year ago, and already, Bilbo felt completely unease by the separation. Any plans to return back to Bag End were well and truly out the window at this point, not when Thorin Oakenshield had ruined him for any other life except the one by his side.

Bilbo hoped that wherever Thorin was, he will find them soon.

Although Fíli and Kíli's initial message from the Ravens bore good news, the ones they had received immediately afterwards were significantly darker:

Bilbo and Ori were severely beaten for their attempted escape. Both are hurt but alive for now.

Bilbo and Ori are being forced into riding westward away from Lake-town at knife point.

Bilbo and Ori are kept in an abandoned cabin under half an hour's ride towards the west of Lake-town. Both are kept in the basement. They are alive but badly hurt.

They had also received a message from Nori:

T,
Found the identities of the last two attackers, (see attached profile sketches). I've also discovered the location to where the hostages are held and have included a map to it. Turns out the property was recently purchased by one of the captors. Amateurs. How shall we proceed?
- *N*

Thorin looked up from this newest set of notes to see Balin, Dwalin, Dori and his nephews silently stare back at him, their expressions ranged from grim to thunderous. Dori and Dwalin, in particular, looked like they were ready to strike out on their own, but even at their angriest and most desperate, they were willing to follow his command. Their loyalty was humbling and Thorin could not ask for better men.

He wasn't going to disappoint them either.

"Gather the Company," Thorin ordered as he reached for his armor, "and send a message to Bard and Nori. We are meeting in Lake-town. The time to strike our enemies is now."

His men's enthusiasm to seek their revenge was unparalleled. In record time, the Company had not only assembled with their horses and their weapons ready, they also found themselves riding fast across the flat, grassland valley to Lake-town with the same, desperate urgency reserved for escaping Orc packs.

"You lot showed up quick," Nori said from his saddled horse in a way of greeting when they reached the newly reconstructed bridge to Lake-town. "Where's Lord Dáin?"

"I asked him to stay and watch Erebor in my absence," Thorin replied as he brought his pony closer to the thief. "He was most disappointed. He rather liked Bilbo and was looking forward to the fight." He frowned, "Where is King Bard?"

"Still in the process of getting ready. He'll be meeting with us near the west-end of Lake-town instead." Nori gestured towards the town, "But before we proceed, I would suggest for everyone to pull their hoods up. Wouldn't want any tongues to wag if any of you is recognized."

They traveled at a sedated pace in a single-file, their horses clip clopping against the wood lined platforms that make up the streets. It was the first time that Thorin, or any of the Dwarves save Nori, had been back to Lake-town after its devastation, and Thorin could see just how much of the area had been decimated by the dragon. Most of its buildings were charred, leaving blackened remains of its gutted, crumbling skeletons standing on both sides of the road in a macabre display. The smell of smoke was still heavy in the air and the unpleasant scent stung Thorin's nostrils. The people around the Dwarves seemed completely nonplussed by all of this, however. They were traversing through the empty spaces where the buildings once stood, happily using them as a shortcut to get to the nearest road.

Although the Dwarves were dressed inconspicuously, their Company still drew more curious looks than Thorin would like. Carefully, he pulled his hood further over his head until his face was shielded away from prying eyes. He remembered what Nori said and he did not want to be recognized, not if it meant that he would be delayed from rescuing his Bilbo.

They slowly reached to a cluster of smaller and surprisingly undamaged houses near the fringe of the city. Thorin's eyes were immediately drawn to where Bard and half a dozen archers were milling about.

"I have brought my best archers with me," Bard waved to his men and explained after they had exchanged their greetings. "Although their number is small, their skills are unparalleled. I also assumed that you wanted to have a more covert operation."

Thorin nodded, "You assumed correctly. I have learned that Bilbo and Ori were kept in a cabin to the west of here. It would be much too easy for the kidnappers to discover us and to use them as shields if we were to charge in a large group. We have a better chance at succeeding if we catch them off guard, and a small number of men is conducive to this strategy."

"What else do we know about the captors' current situation?"

"All four of them are currently on site but I have no idea if they hired any other mercenaries to do their bidding," Nori answered smoothly. "We will need to find a way to draw them out first though." He added in a sheepish tone, "We might have to improvise on that, but the general strategy that I liked to use if I wanted to get someone to mindlessly run where I want them to run is to get them angry."

He exchanged glances with both kings and repeated, "Very, very angry."

The clearing was deadly quiet save for the rambunctious sound of drunken merry making that came from the sad little dilapidated cottage at the middle of the field. Under the cover of the dense trees and bushes, Thorin kept his eyes on the house, waiting impatiently from his crouched position. Another bout of loud laughter had him gritting his teeth as his hands clenched tightly around the hilt of Orcrist until his knuckles were white.

Dwalin and Dori shifted beside him, equally angry and anxious to wipe the grin off of those kidnappers' faces. He nodded to them both and signed in Iglishmêk: '*Soon. For now, we wait.*'

Just as he had delivered that message, he saw Nori, Bofur, and Bifur quietly sneak their way into the clearing, keeping their footsteps as light as possible on the dry, crumbling grass. They made a wide berth to avoid any of the windows of the house, an extra precaution even when most of these windows had been boarded up, and they slowly crept towards the wooden pen where the horses were kept.

Then, they proceeded to knock over every single bucket and crate that was within reach with great enthusiasm and with the single-minded goal to create as much ruckus as possible.

Instantly, the sound inside the cabin stopped, followed by a very audible and confused, "Did you hear that?"

The three Dwarves grinned widely before shifting their attention to work on the ropes that tied the horses to the posts. They carried on their task even when the front door of the house slammed open and the small, skeletal looking man, Aldor, stood gaping at them, flabbergasted.

Bifur looked up briefly to throw an obscene hand gesture at the newcomer. The man spluttered in indignation. From their hiding spot in the bushes, Thorin heard Óin snort.

"Horse thieves!" Aldor finally screeched out after opening and closing his mouth a few times, "Help! Help! Thieves and *they are stealing our horses*!"

Pounding footsteps echoed loudly from the house, followed by a muffled shout, "You idiot! Don't just stand here, *stop them*!"

"I can't just march up there and stop them! There are three of them and one of me!"

"Well then, by all means. Do continue to stand there and watch them steal our horses, you useless sack of shit!"

In the meantime, the Dwarves had successfully untied the last horse and were ushering them towards the open gate. The frightened herd did not need much encouragement to bolt from the premises.

"Stop thieves!" a new voice cried out, and Nori, Bifur and Bofur spun around in time to see all four captives out in the open with their swords drawn. Thorin frowned at the sight. Was that it? Did they only have four people at the house? Somehow, he had expected...more from the people who gave him so much grief.

Nori apparently had the same train of thought.

"Is this it? Just you four?" the thief taunted in an especially aggravating sing-song voice that made the four men bristle. "And here I was looking forward to a challenge. I'm rather disappointed, really."

"We may be four but that's still one more to you three!" Aldor shouted back heatedly as his face flushed into an unattractive bright red. "Besides, we – "

Galion reached over and smacked him in the back of his head. "Idiot!" the blond hissed, "Stop talking!"

"Well, this has been great fun but we really must dash," Nori drawled out, unimpressed. He folded his arms over his chest. "I hope you don't mind, we helped ourselves to some of your, er, things." Bofur held up a bulging leather pouch and gave the men a happy little wave with his free hand. "Anyway, so long and thanks for the horses!"

With a final, sloppy salute, Nori, Bifur and Bofur turned and bolted after the horses as if the demons themselves were after their tail. A split second later, the men followed with their swords swinging, hollering death threats. Thorin watched anxiously as his three companions led the captors across the clearing in a merry chase, ducking and dodging projectiles that were thrown at them while whooping all the way in delight. Bifur, in particular, stunned the captors by spinning around just in time to neatly catch a small knife aimed for his head. He laughed raucously and shouted his response back in Khuzdûl.

"He said, thank you for the knife! It will fetch a pretty penny in the market," Bofur translated helpfully, if not a bit too cheerful. The collective answering roar of anger from the men was like music to their ears.

Thorin kept his gaze on the captors until they ran into the forest, making sure that their backs had disappeared behind the wall of dense trees, before making his move. "Now!" he ordered quietly, and he emerged from his hiding spot with the rest of his Company behind him.

Quickly, they dashed towards the cabin as a synchronized unit, the fluidity of their movement reflected by their familiarity with each other that could only be forged through shared battle experiences. Thorin was the first to reach the small building and he immediately pressed his back against the weathered wooden wall, crouching below the windows to avoid detection. He motioned for his companions to do the same.

Somewhere in the forest, Nori's insult echoed loudly, "Is that the best you can do? Even my old crippled mother can swing harder than that!"

Dori muttered somewhere to Thorin's right, barely audible, "I wish he wouldn't say that about our good mum."

Thorin ignored him. Frankly, Nori had free reign to say whatever he wanted so long as he was successful. According to the plan, Nori, Bifur and Bofur were just about to lead the men into an ambush where Bard and his archers lay waiting, and if the thief wanted to cajole the kidnappers to make it work, he can go right on ahead.

'Dwalin, Dori and Óin, come with me,' the Dwarven king signed in Iglishmêk once he caught everyone's attention. *'The rest of you, spread out and guard the exits: the door, the windows. If anyone surrenders, let them. Kill only those who resist.'*

At his companions' collective nods, he pushed himself off the wall and headed for the front entrance, all the while keeping low to the ground and his ears perked for any unexpected visitors. Their surroundings stayed eerily silent and Thorin was beginning to suspect that a nastier surprise might lie in wait for them once they were inside, but this was hardly the time to be afraid, not when he was this close to finding Bilbo and Ori.

They reached the door and true to prediction, it was left ajar by the kidnappers in their mad rush to stop the supposed horse thieves. Thorin leaned forward to peer through the crack. He could see what looked to be a dim sitting room with large, but boarded up, windows, and with wooden, rustic furnishings.

There weren't any movement inside.

Slowly, he drew out his sword and he nudged the door open so that the space was large enough for him and his men to pass through. He shuffled into the room, unnerved by the silence but he was too stubborn and proud to show it. The musky scent of dust mixed with the stink of alcohol and sweat was heavy in the room, and it reminded the Dwarf of the inns in which he frequently boarded whenever he took up smithing jobs in Mannish settlements. They were a miserable place laden with all manners of filth.

Thorin frowned deeply. This place was no different.

'Spread out,*'* he motioned to his small team. *'Find the basement*. *Stay quiet, stay alert, and do not leave out of sight.'*

Thorin's initial glimpse of the room was pretty much spot on. There wasn't much to see in this dingy space aside from two possible entry ways, one of which had its door closed. Thorin walked up to the door, diverting his attention on keeping his footing light, and pressed his ear against its surface. When he heard no sound, he lightly pushed against it to see if it will budge.

It did not move. *'Probably locked*,*'* Thorin concluded, annoyed that he couldn't give into his usual method and kick the damned thing open. He made a mental note to revisit this door if their other exit options were exhausted.

Feeling a light tap on his shoulder, he turned around and raised his brow in surprise at a smirking Óin. *'Found a door at the end of the hallway beyond this room,'* the healer signed quickly but deftly despite his obvious excitement. *'It leads to a set of stairs that go down. I think that's the basement.'*

Thorin swallowed hard and he felt his heartbeat spike. *'Lead the way,'* he responded before he waved Dwalin and Dori over from their respective corners.

'Any sign of life?' Thorin asked his other two companions.

Dwalin and Dori both shook their heads. *'I find it odd and rather disturbing,'* Dori added as he casted sideway glances at the dark corners of the room, suspicious that something dangerous might be hidden away from sight.

'Then again, they weren't very good hiding their trail to begin with,' Dwalin offered with a shrug. *'Perhaps we were dealing with amateurs like Nori had suggested. If the place was more heavily fortified, surely we would have encountered the guards by now.'*

'It could be,*'* Thorin allowed. *'Best keep our eyes out just in case.'*

The Dwarves dutifully followed Óin out of the room and down the short, dimly lit hallway until they reached a small wooden door that was left partially opened. *'In here*,*'* Óin gestured. *'It looks like there is only a door at the end of the staircase and nothing else*. *It should be safe to go down – '*

Óin had barely finished his sentence before Thorin threw caution to the wind by dashing down the staircase, skipping two steps at a time. If anyone even *dared* to show up right then and there to stop them from entering that room, Thorin will not hesitate, not for *one* single second, to slice them open from navel to neck, and that's assuming that Dori and Dwalin hadn't killed them first. Reaching the dark, wooden door, the Dwarven king wasted no time in pulling hard against the handle, desperately trying to wrench the door open to no success.

Locked, of course.

"Bilbo?" he cried out, his voice thick with emotion as he rammed his shoulder against its wooden surface. Still, it wouldn't budge. He tried it again, harder this time. "Bilbo? Beloved, if you can hear me, please answer."

"Move aside, I got this."

Thorin sidestepped just in time to avoid Dori's round house kick to the door, sending it, along with a good chunk of the wall where the latch was connected, flying outwards in an impressive shower of wooden splinters. The door swung open fully and hit the opposite wall so hard that it loosened a cloud of dust from the ceiling.

"See? I told you I got this." Dori said dryly as he brushed the fine layer of dust off his coat to the incredulous stares of his peers.

They did not dwell on Dori's impressive physical prowess for long. Thorin nodded a quick thanks and swept into the dark, dank room with Dwalin and Dori nipping at his heels and –

His heart *broke* at the sight.

"Oh, Mahal," he choked out. In front of him were Bilbo and Ori on the floor, bloodied, bruised, and curled on their side so that they were facing each other. Their clothes were ripped with large gashes that ran along the sleeves and the pant legs, and Thorin could see more blood staining along the ragged edges of the torn cloth. Both were unconscious and deathly pale.

He moved closer, he must have, because the next thing he knew, his shaking hands were gently cradling against his Hobbit's bloodied and bruised face, and his knees were pressing against the damp floor planks. Slowly, he carded through Bilbo's soft russet curls, taking extra precaution to avoid the areas that were caked in blood, as he began to catalogue every wound that his beloved had suffered through.

Bruised at the back of his skull, bruise at the temple, a cut near the forehead, bruise along the right cheek...

He let his fingers traveled back to his soft, chilled cheeks, and across his face, only sighing in relief when he could feel Bilbo's soft exhale through his nose.

Hurt but alive. Thank the Valars.

"But you're as cold as ice," he heard himself murmur distantly. He automatically ripped off his dark hooded cloak along with his prized fur surcoat without caring if he tore the fabric. "We need to get you warm, love."

Just as he was about to bundle Bilbo in his makeshift blanket, he noticed something glinting around his neck. Frowning deeply, he reached for the mysterious item. "What's this?" he questioned, fingering at the cold band – *metal*, his mind whispered – and his eyes widened in shock.

The faint, delicate sound of a metal chain rattling nearby only provided further proof to what he suspected.

"A collar," he said loud enough for Dwalin to look up from his protective hold of Ori with red-rimmed eyes. "They collared them to this cell like they were animals."

Beside Ori, Dori made a choked, keening sound in his throat and Óin cursed loudly. "No, Dwalin." Thorin heard the healer bark out, "Let go of the chain, you old fool. You won't be able to tear it out of the wall and you're jostling him too much. I need to finish binding his arm."

Thorin tuned them out to focus on tending to his Bilbo. "We'll need to get you out of your wet clothing once we're home," he said softly as he finished wrapping Bilbo in his coat. "Can't have you catch a chill like you did when we escaped Thranduil's prison. You're miserable when you're sick."

We'll also need to find a way to get that horrible contraption off of you, he thought, but he hadn't dared to say that out loud, not if it could potentially scare Bilbo.

"Your Majesty." Thorin looked up to see Óin kneeling from the other side of Bilbo. His bottles of salves were neatly laid out on the ground. When did he get here? "I'm going to check on his wounds now," the Dwarf said soothingly and Thorin dimly realized that he was using the same tone to calm his patients in shock. "I'm going to start with the head first, then I will have to ask you to peel away the blankets. Please nod if you understand."

Thorin nodded mechanically.

"Good," Óin replied with a small smile and then, he went to work. "Cuts to the head often look worse than they are because of the amount of bleeding," the Dwarf gently explained as he pushed back Bilbo's hair, exposing his forehead. He hummed, uncorked one of his bottles, and poured a liberal amount over his finger. "I'm going to spread this liberally over his cut to stop any potential infections. Once we return to camp, we will clean his injuries properly and reapply a different kind of ointment."

Thorin latched on to the healer's words, letting his instructions wash over him in a calming wave. He had a feeling that that was Óin's intention and he could not begin to express his gratitude.

"The head is done, your Majesty, and the good news is that his injuries are not too severe." Óin pressed his fingers against Bilbo's skin and frowned. "It's his temperature that I'm worried about. He is entirely too chilled. You acted correctly with providing him some blankets but we're going to have to remove his wet clothing immediately. Anything that is too waterlogged, nothing that will cause indecency," he added quickly when Thorin gave him an affronted look.

They managed to peel off his coat and his tunic when Bilbo stirred with a weak, pained moan.

"Bilbo?" Thorin asked, hopeful. He tucked the make-shift blanket around Bilbo again before leaning forward to press his warm hand against his cheek, his thumb rubbing small, soothing circle against the delicate skin.

"Thorin," the Hobbit breathed out as if he could not believe that the Dwarf was beside him. His bleary eyes struggled to focus on Thorin's face. "Thorin, is that you?"

"That's right, I'm right here," the Dwarf said, his voice cracking. He pressed a gentle kiss over Bilbo's cheek, on his forehead just below the cut, and finally, over his pale lips. "I'm here, Bilbo, and I'm not going anywhere," he whispered, leaning in for a sweet, lingering kiss.

Finally, his mind whispered. He had felt the sharp, hollow ache of Bilbo's disappearance so deeply that he nearly felt overwhelmed from just being able to hold him, *kiss* him.

However, Bilbo's choked sob was enough for Thorin to pull away despite that was the last thing he wanted. "Bilbo, love, what is the matter?" he asked, alarmed.

Bilbo opened and closed his mouth wordlessly before snapping his eyes shut, shaking his head. Thorin felt his heart hurt all over again and he never felt so helpless, but more than anything, he wanted to *fix* this. "Shhh, it's alright," he brushed away the tears that were streaming from his beloved's face, "it's alright. It's alright."

"No, no it isn't," Bilbo shook his head again and rasped out. "I couldn't stop them. I tried – " he choked off and swallowed heavily before continuing, " I tried to save him, but I couldn't. I *couldn't*."

Confused, Thorin frowned lightly. Was he talking about Ori? He continued to rub soothing circles over his Bilbo's cheek. He never wanted to stop touching his beloved. "Ori is fine," he ventured calmly, "Óin treated him and he should be just fine. He's beside you with Dwalin and Dori. He couldn't be in safer hands."

"Not, not Ori," Bilbo corrected as he blinked away fresh tears. "He tried to get Ori some help for his arm but they got him instead." He pointed a shaky finger to a part of the room that was previously hidden in the shadows, and Thorin followed his movement, squinting to make out what Bilbo had meant. Then, his eyes widened in shock.

Lying on the ground from across the room in a pool of his own blood was Haldan, staring at the ceiling with glassy, vacant eyes. His throat had been slashed open.

"They've been inside for an awfully long time."

Fíli blinked out of his reverie and frowned at the unusual seriousness in his brother's voice.

"They have," he agreed quietly, "but we haven't heard much noise in there except for that one loud crash. It doesn't sound like a fight went on."

Truth be told, Fíli was getting as worried as his brother. His Uncle had been inside the house for quite some time now, leaving a good number of the Company to guard its perimeter. Things had been awfully quiet inside and outside of the house, with no sign of life anywhere near the premises.

Fíli can't help but wait in anticipation for the second shoe to drop.

"Do you think that Bilbo and Ori will be alright?" Kíli asked in a small, insecure voice that never failed to make Fíli's protective nature flare up. Back in the Blue Mountains, he had garnered a reputation for being downright vicious to those who hurt his little brother, and despite Kíli's insistent that he could fight his own battles, Fíli had never stopped doing what he can to keep his spirits up.

And he wasn't going to stop now either.

Plastering on a large grin, Fíli answered, "Oh come now. Ori and Bilbo are some of the toughest people we know! Remember that time when Ori did that crazy rolling trick to outrun us? As for Bilbo, he's the 'bravest Hobbit of them all'! Even his song said so!" When Kíli still looked a bit dubious, he added, "Surely, you're not going to *insult* your own intelligence by saying that they're weak?"

Kíli predictably flushed in anger. "I am not insulting anything!" he spluttered, affronted. "I *know* that they're not weak at all and they're probably doing just fine! I'm just asking is all! Now if you'll excuse me, I have an entrance to guard!" He spun away in a huff, muttering angrily under his breath.

Fíli let his large grin fade into a smaller, but more genuine smile. *Little brothers*, he thought fondly. "Kíli, I think – "

The front door to the house slammed open and immediately, all the Dwarves rushed towards it with their weapons raised. At the sight of Thorin however, they all breathed a sigh of relief.

That was until they all saw the blood thirsty murder in his eyes.

"There is no one in the house and I doubt there are any mercenaries around," Thorin ground out angrily between clenched teeth. "Where is Nori? I wish to speak to the four attackers."

"Right here, your Majesty."

Nori, Bofur and Bifur trudged across the clearing, followed by Bard and the attackers, who were sandwiched on all sides by the six archers. The four kidnappers were sporting fresh injuries, and their hands and feet were bound.

"Your Majesty," Bard greeted Thorin in his characteristic somber voice, "what news do you bring? How are Master Bilbo and Master Ori?"

"They are alive and are being treated by my healer," Thorin said curtly as he glared at the kidnappers after they were forced roughly to their knees. "But they are both sporting metal collars that kept them chained to their prison."

Fíli had never heard his Uncle so angry. *And rightly so*, he thought in shocked horror. *Dear Mahal, what were they doing to Bilbo and Ori?*

Thorin continued, "I am here to ask for the key to release them. Where is it?" He marched up to the four prisoners and demanded coldly.

None of the men talked but Fíli noticed that the short one was starting to quake.

Finally, after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, the blonde one with the Elvish features spoke up. "We don't have to tell you anything, filthy Dwarf," he sneered out arrogantly. He spat towards Thorin's feet as an added insult.

Thorin raised an inquisitive brow, "Oh? Is that right?" He clasped his hands to the front of his body and chuckled darkly, "Thank you for volunteering."

Before the blonde could draw back in confusion, Thorin brought his fist forward and viciously punched him in the face.

"Where is the key?" he asked calmly as everyone stared, shock still.

The blond gave no answer except to writhe on the ground, groaning in pain.

Thorin hauled the man up by his hair and punched him again, this time shattering his nose.

"Where is the key?" he demanded louder.

The blond had curled himself up in a foetal position on the ground, openly sobbing as he clutched at his bleeding face.

Thorin shook his head in disgust and pulled the man upright by the front of his shirt. "Where. Is. The. KEY?!" He shouted, punctuating each word with a new punch that got progressively more, and more violent.

"Thorin!" Bard cried out, alarmed. He was so shocked that he forgot to use any formalities. "Thorin, I understand that you're frustrated but this cannot be – "

"They killed Haldan," Thorin cut in, his voice beyond frigid among the Company's audible gasp. Fíli shuffled closer to his little brother, drawing comfort from the warmth that he could feel pressing back against him. "I found his body in the basement after listening to my beloved in tears," Thorin continued, swallowing thickly, "my beloved in tears and *apologizing* for not being able to save him because he was *chained* in place." Thorin's lips pulled back in a snarl so full of fury that the archers took a step back, "I will have the key one way or another and *I will not be denied*."

Bard stared back, wide-eyed. "How," he asked quietly, brokenly.

Thorin understood what he meant. "A cut throat."

Bard nodded, never losing the look of shock. Fíli cannot help but pity him for having to discover this terrible news like that, not when he had held out hope that his advisor was still alive. Anyone could see that Bard had spent all the manpower that he had in his disposal to scour the country side, looking for the missing man.

It must crush his spirit to realize that it was all for naught, that despite his best efforts, he was still too late.

"I think I will go pay my respect to Mister Haldan," the bowman said hollowly. He bowed his head to Thorin and muttered lowly, "Carry on." With that, he gestured for his archers to follow him and they left for the cabin's entrance, never once turning back.

"Now," Thorin's grin was positively evil at the utter terror on the kidnappers' faces. He cracked his knuckles, "let me ask you again: Where is the key?"

Bilbo woke up in stages. At first, he noticed the delightful warmth surrounding him and the softness of the material that cradled his body, followed by the familiar scent of leather, iron and sandalwood.

The second thing he noticed was the sound of conversation.

" – healed his injuries as best as I could. Luckily, he escaped relatively unscathed."

"You call this lucky?" A sarcastic snort sounded close to his ear. "I do not think I want to know what you consider as unlucky."

"I must say," the first speaker began, and he sounded so terribly familiar to Bilbo, "I was not expecting this outcome when I left. I had my doubts, but he was very insistent from the start to stay at the camp to help. He even refused my offer to escort him back to the Shire." There was a beat of silence. "My congratulations to you, Thorin Oakenshield, on finding the one who can make you happy."

"Thank you, Gandalf," Thorin replied, obviously touched, and Bilbo had no doubt that that was Thorin who was speaking. He could never forget his Thorin's voice.

Keeping his eyes closed, Bilbo murmured, his words slurring slightly from sleep, "I hope you're not thinking about leaving us so soon, Gandalf. You just got here."

He opened his eyes and smiled softly at the twin looks of surprise on Thorin and Gandalf's faces. Unsurprisingly, the Wizard's appearance had not changed since the last time that Bilbo saw him; he was still sporting his long, grey cloak and his great big, wide-brimmed hat, although at the moment, he was holding it in his lap. The Wizard had also seemed to have made himself perfectly comfortable in his seat on a short, Dwarven stool, unbothered by the way he had to bend his long legs to fit. From the corner of his eyes, Bilbo could make out Gandalf's wooden staff propped against a nearby wall.

Like he had thought, nothing ever seemed to change with Gandalf the Grey.

Bilbo cleared his throat and greeted, "Good morning."

Gandalf chuckled and his eyes twinkled mischievously. "What do you mean?" he started and Bilbo, having realized where this was going, groaned. "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it to be or not, or that you feel good this morning, or that it is a morning to be good on?"

"You know what? I take back what I said about you staying. I take it all back," Bilbo laughed incredulously, allowing Thorin's arms to loop around him to help him sit up. "The door is that way. Good morning!" He turned to a visibly relieved Thorin and added wryly, "Wizards. They bring us nothing but trouble. It's best to stay away from that lot."

Thorin gently took Bilbo's hand and brought it up against his lips for a kiss. "I shall do my best to remember that, love," he said, his smile shaky and his eyes bright. Bilbo was helpless but to lean forward and press his own chaste kiss against Thorin's lips, barely resisting the urge to pull the Dwarf closer to deepen the kiss. He must look stupidly besotted, but he honestly cannot care less. The whole bloody camp knew about him and Thorin way before he and the Dwarven king could figure out for themselves. As far as Bilbo was concerned, he and Thorin had a lot of lost time to make up for.

Gandalf let out a little harrumph, but the corners of his lips were twitching in amusement. "I see that your good spirit has returned," he said dryly. "How are you feeling, Bilbo?"

"Doing alright," Bilbo shifted over to allow space for Thorin to lie with him in his bed. He blinked when he noticed that his back was not screaming in protest. "Surprisingly good, actually," he said with wonder until suspicion started to creep in. He narrowed his eyes at Thorin and at Gandalf. "How long was I out for?"

"Not long," Thorin answered smoothly. He climbed on the bed and greedily took up the free spot that Bilbo had made for him, taking the opportunity to wrap an arm over the Hobbit's shoulder and plant a kiss at the tip of his pointed ear. Oh Eru, Bilbo will be spoiled in no time if Thorin kept that up. "I would say that you have been asleep for about a day or so."

"Closer to two," Gandalf corrected gently.

"*Two?*"

"More like a day and a half," Thorin gritted out. He threw Gandalf a glare. "But that is inconsequential. You needed the rest after what you've been though."

Thorin's solemn words instantly popped the warm bubble that surrounded Bilbo, unleashing the memories of what he had experienced in the past couple of days. Truth be told, what had transpired after Bilbo and Ori's initial escape was a bit fuzzy, and the scrambled snippets that Bilbo could remember were enough to have him feeling shaken.

"Bilbo? Are you alright?" Thorin called out in worry. He tightened his hold on Bilbo when he snuggled closer to lean against his chest. "Maybe some more rest will do you some good."

Bilbo shook his head, snapping his eyes shut. He had to piece together what had happened or else he will never find peace. "No, I don't want to rest, I just want a bit of time to think," he pleaded. He remembered getting hauled back to the boat from the lake, getting his back hurt from the beating that he had received while Ori fought tooth and nail against the attackers, and...

"Ori!" he looked up in alarm. "Is he alright? His arm! They broke his arm!"

"Ori is fine, Bilbo," Gandalf leaned over from his seat and gently patted Bilbo on the shoulder at the same time that Thorin started to rub small, soothing circles over his back. "His brothers and Master Dwalin are taking good care of him, though I suspect that his biggest concern at the moment is to balance his time with all three Dwarves without seeming like he has a favourite." The Wizard continued, his amusement colouring his words, "Master Dwalin was so starved for more time with Master Ori that he had taken the drastic measure to move in to Master Ori's tent *and* to share the same sleeping cot with him. Master Nori did not enjoy walking into the tent to see his younger brother and Master Dwalin spooning." Gandalf chuckled at the memory, "Surprisingly, it was Master Dori who had to hold Master Nori back."

Bilbo laughed weakly at the mental picture as he sank into Thorin's touch, grateful to hear some much needed good news. Ori and he had gone through a lot together and if there was anyone who deserved to be happy after this ordeal, it was that Dwarf.

He still felt like he was missing something though.

"Bilbo," Thorin's hesitation made the Hobbit nervous. "Do you remember anything else?"

Bilbo furrowed his brows and picked up his train of thought where he had left it. Ori and he were chained to a cell? No, something else happened before that. Ori and he were beaten, gagged and bound, then they were forced to go back to their cells, but how?

"We should not have partnered up with those two idiots. Can't believe they almost lost our captives. Where the hell was Haldan when they ran?"

Haldan.

Immediately, all the pieces started to click together in Bilbo's mind – the horse ride, being thrown back into the dungeon, Haldan who was at first furious at Bilbo for escaping but quickly became concerned when the Hobbit was barely responding to any of his inquiries except to tell him to 'watch Mallor' over and over again.

Haldan had paled even further at the state of Ori's arm.

Haldan had argued loudly with the rest of his team members to get proper treatment for Ori and him while they were being chained to the basement. "We are not murderers!" he had screamed, "We are in this for the money only. There's no point in killing them or leaving them to die. Look, we've got them chained, we've boarded up the windows, we've *won*!"

But the other four were not having it.

"You've gone weak!" Mallor had spat out, "Look at you, sympathizing with the enemy. What are you planning to do next? Repent your wrong-doings and turn us in?"

Run, Bilbo had mouthed to Haldan. *Run*. And finally, Haldan had understood Bilbo's warning, but it was far too late.

Things had gone downhill very quickly. Bilbo was wrong about Beren; he and Aldor hadn't needed much persuading after all. They all turned on Haldan.

And that had been that.

"I remember," Bilbo choked out, and it felt like a great, heavy weight has been lifted from his chest. He was shaking violently even as he allowed himself to be enfolded in Thorin's protective embrace, "I remember. I remember."

Dear Mother,

I hope you are doing well in the Blue Mountains. We're sorry that we haven't been able to write to you as often as we would like these past few weeks, but you probably know why.

The first group of the Blue Mountain Dwarves have settled themselves in the camp and we've all been busy, showing these new Dwarves where to go, what to do, how farming works, (*don't forget about the why's, Fíli. A lot of them like to ask why,)* definitely a lot of the Blue Mountain Dwarves like to ask that.

(The Iron Hills Dwarves never gave us that much trouble before. Do you reckon it's because of all those speeches that Bilbo likes to give at the beginning of every farming session?) It must be. He and Uncle also unintentionally put on quite the show for the Dwarves, so that definitely helped boost enthusiasm for farming. ~~It's too bad that Bilbo hasn't –~~

(Yeah, I miss Bilbo too. He'll be back soon though. Someone very wise once said that he's not called 'the bravest little Hobbit of them all' without good reason.)

Aww, thanks Kíli! *(I wasn't talking about you, idiot. I was talking about Bifur. He was the one who wrote that song)*.

Things are slowly getting back to normal, mother. Ori's arm is healing nicely and I think that no one is happier about this than Ori himself, only because it means that he will finally be free from Master Nori, Master Dori, and Master Dwalin's collective hovering. *(I don't think he minds Master Dwalin. Most of the time that I catch them together, they're snogging away on the nearest available surface. It's the two older brothers who are probably causing most of the trouble)*.

Speaking of Ori, Kíli and I caught him sketching along the riverbank last night with an oil lamp beside him. Every once in a while, he would stop and gaze deeply at the water to the point where it would almost look like he's glaring at it. Then, he'd go back to furiously drawing his sketch. When we stopped to ask him what he was doing, did you know what he said?

(He looked at us with this frenzied expression and muttered in all seriousness, "I am designing a boat, one that can carry me and Dwalin far, far away from my two wretched brothers. And if you tell them what I've been up to, I will feed you your own bollocks." I've never felt so terrified.)

It didn't help that the little, flickering oil lamp that he carried with him was casting all these dark shadows over his face when he said that either.

(We may or may not have run away, but it was a sound tactical retreat.)

You know what I also noticed? Master Dori seemed to carry a lot less animosity towards Master Dwalin. I heard that Master Dwalin was even invited to one of Master Dori's frou-frou Sunday brunches and that Master Dwalin had performed most admirably under pressure.

(Who could blame Master Dwalin? I heard that Master Dori roundhouse kicked a locked door so hard that not only did the entire door blew off its hinges, it sailed ten, no, twenty feet into the air before imbedding into a solid stone wall. If a Dwarf like that wants me to sit down and drink tea with him, I will sit down and drink as many damned cups of tea as he would like, so long as he doesn't kick my head in.)

Why are all the brother Ri's so terrifying? I'm starting to think that Master Nori is the most normal member of the bunch and that's...just so sad.

On another topic, Uncle is doing well, by the way, but I trust that you've probably heard what he's been up to directly from him. *(Mostly, he just works beside Bilbo, who's been keeping to himself. Uncle told us to leave him alone and to give him some time to heal, but we've been secretly placing pie under his bed as a get well present.)* I hope he doesn't mind!

I also hope he finds them...

Please let us know if you need anything else, unless it involves the Ri brothers. *(We don't want to die.)*

Lots and lots of love as always,

Fíli and Kíli

Erebor, 9 Apr., 2942.

PS: Did you know that Gandalf is in the camp with us? He's been milling about for the past couple of weeks, smoking his pipe-weed. We think he's staying to help Bilbo. Either way, it's good to see a familiar face around the camp!

To my two lovely sons,

Thank you for your letter and your very creative description of Master Dori's superior door kicking skills, although I reserve some doubts about the door blowing off its hinges. Chances are, the door probably exploded into a million little pieces of razor sharp, wooden shrapnel that can imbed itself into nearby soft targets, instantly killing them in a horribly gruesome manner.

Soft targets like...reckless Dwarven princes who thought it would be a grand idea to go traipsing in the wilderness without wearing their proper protective armor because they get too warm in them.

Wear your protective armor, boys. I do not want to receive a letter from your Uncle about my two idiot sons having died from door shrapnel.

You were right in guessing that I've been talking to your Uncle and like you said, he has been doing most of his work close to Master Baggins. Rest assured, Master Baggins is healing well. He just needs a bit more time to sort through his thoughts. He will be right as rain, and I suspect that it will happen much sooner than later.

Please offer Master Dwalin and Master Ori my most sincere congratulations for their blatant disregard of outdated, archaic, and utterly nonsensical courting customs, as any free thinking Dwarf should! The two Dwarves are in love. If they want to snog on every available surface, then more power to them! They have my complete and utter blessing although I doubt it counts for much.

The Blue Mountains are faring well. It has, however, gotten significantly quieter now that many Dwarves have left for Erebor. I have been asked many times to join one of the traveling caravans but I find myself hesitant to leave this place. I have established my company here with my farm, my business, and my growing number of loyal workers. I do not think I can abandon them. Perhaps one day, I will pass my distillery to a well trusted person, (possibly Teleporno. He is an absolute stellar worker!) but until then, I doubt I will be coming to live in Erebor.

I will visit though, don't you fret! And when I do, I better see you wearing your protective armour!

Many hugs and kisses,

Your mother

Thorin’s Hall, 2942.

From Erebor, 2942.

Dís,

I wanted to thank you for your advice to act normally around Bilbo and to, as you so eloquently put it, "stop smothering the Hobbit with your massive, brooding presence, you great oaf. It's stifling and I bet it will only make him feel even guiltier!" I have implemented your suggestion and have been patiently waiting for Bilbo to talk rather than badger him with questions, and I only approached him to work beside him whenever he offered me the invitation.

Today, Bilbo has revealed the full story behind the kidnapping from his point of view not only to myself and King Bard, but to the rest of the Company. He has also given us permission to pass this story on to whomever we see fit.

Although we have heard Ori's accounts on what happened (which is the version of the kidnapping that I told you), Bilbo's version provided a deeper insight surrounding the late Mister Haldan.

He is not completely wicked as we had initially believed. Mister Haldan had tried to atone for his misdeeds committed before Smaug's attack on Lake-town, but believing that he had failed and that his life was consequently in danger, he went for a desperate gamble to save his own skin. The kidnapping was mostly orchestrated by him in an attempt to gather

enough gold to start a new life elsewhere, and it would have worked if he hadn't had to rush his plans when he heard that Gandalf the Grey was arriving to Erebor.

Despite the grief that he had caused all of us with that kidnapping stint, he had always insisted on treating the prisoners well. Bilbo and Ori both testified that Mister Haldan kept them fed and, in Bilbo's case, supplied with tea. The same cannot be said for his four partners-in-crime, two of which planned to murder Mister Haldan and pin the crime on the rest of the members so that they could keep all the gold for themselves.

Unfortunately for Mister Haldan, his strong stance on treating the prisoners well had made him unpopular enough that all four partners-in-crime jumped at the chance to murder him. Bilbo had tried to warn Mister Haldan but by the time he understood the warning, it was far too late.

I find myself at a loss for words over how I feel about Mister Haldan. It is far too easy to hate the man without understanding his motives but now, I only feel tired and saddened that Bilbo had to suffer through this trauma. I know that Bilbo mourns him still. For what it's worth, Bilbo had considered him a friend.

Bilbo and I will be visiting his grave site tomorrow and I hope that that will bring us some much needed closure.

We are moving forward. The progress is slow, but we are moving forward.

- Thorin

"Thorin, Fíli and Kíli have been leaving more pie under my bed."

Thorin looked up from his reading, (*'Soil Composition Assessment in the South-East Region of Erebor, Part 4/Section 2S3H90'*, Mahal, couldn't they name these reports with better titles?) taking care to suppress the violent urge to fling the paperwork into a nearby open flame. For one, he had tried it with '*Soil Composition Assessment in the South-East Region of Erebor, Part 3/Section 2S7H89'* after using it for a coaster, and found out that someone *pure evil* had applied wax to the pages.

It had taken him days to clear the acrid smell of smoke from the tent. Bilbo was still mad at him for that stunt.

"Yes, Bilbo?" he asked patiently as he spun from his seat to face the Hobbit. Sure enough, Bilbo was standing by his bed, holding a plate.

"Fíli and Kíli," Bilbo repeated, deeply amused, "put more pie under my bed." He waved the plate around for emphasis and Thorin could see that indeed, it contained a slice of cherry pie. "Why?"

"They may be my nephews, but I never admitted to understanding their brand of insanity," Thorin retorted dryly. "If I were to hazard a guess, I think they are trying to make you feel better."

Bilbo sighed and strode over to his own desk to deposit the plate. "I appreciate the sentiment, but couldn't they deliver it to me personally instead of leaving it under my bed? Why would anyone leave pie under a bed?"

Thorin winced. "They may have interpreted my warning to give you some breathing room...differently." Realizing that his answer still did not explain why anyone would leave pie under the bed out of all the bizarre places, Thorin added, "Also, it's Fíli and Kíli. They do things with a unique brand of logic."

And by that, he meant no logic. None at all. Fíli and Kíli do as they pleased.

A flash of guilt passed over Bilbo's face. "I'm sorry that I've been so difficult to be around," he said softly. He had not moved from his spot by his desk, staring intently at the pie that was in front of him. "You have all been so wonderfully accommodating. I will let those two know that it's alright to give me the pie in person instead of having to sneak in here every day."

Thorin pushed back his chair, strolled up to Bilbo and gently wrapped his arms around the Hobbit from behind. "You have not been difficult and you have nothing to apologize for either," he said gruffly as he pressed a light kiss against Bilbo's temple. "If you need any more time to yourself, let us know. None us will begrudge you for that."

The Dwarf loosened his hold on Bilbo when he twisted around so that they could stand face-to-face, but he paused at the small sound of displeasure that Bilbo made. Thorin smiled crookedly at the Hobbit, who boldly grabbed his larger hands and repositioned them around his own, soft waist. "There," Bilbo breathed out shakily, his eyes bright. "Perfect."

The kiss they shared was slow and languid; both of them enjoying far too much the simple intimacy of lips pressing against soft lips to urge the kiss into something more molten. Thorin ran his hand across the expanse of Bilbo's clothed back, letting his fingers trail up the delicate curve of his spine until they settled at the base of his neck where they could tangle around Bilbo's curls. He breathed in Bilbo's soft, sweet moan and returned it with a deep hum of his own.

Thorin had not set out to seek romance in his life, and a year ago, he was not even sure if he'd live long enough to see Erebor again, but fate had been kind to give him both his love and his home at the same time, and he wasn't about to complain. He swiped his tongue teasingly across Bilbo's lower lips, delighted by the answering shiver he received from his love.

No, he had nothing to complain about at all.

(And if his hand strayed towards his mother's courting bead that he had deliberately kept in his pocket, waiting for the perfect chance to present it to his Bilbo, well, no one is the wiser.)

(Certainly not Bilbo, who was close to tears when he finally received it a week later, and proceeded to give Thorin a very public, very thorough snogging in the middle of the entire camp to the jubilation of everyone, but *especially* Glóin.)

(Many new pamphlets were subsequently published afterwards, followed by two new ballads, a collectible set of commemorative plates, and a new series of beautifully drawn sketches, courtesy of the mysterious pamphlet artist whom the Dwarves have lovingly called the 'Bagginshield Wizard'.)

(Ori was not amused. Dwalin fell off his chair laughing.)

END

Notes:

IT IS DONE, YOU GUYS! IT IS DONNNNEEE!!!

I can't believe it. Wow. Thank you guys, a thousand times over for your support during these past...7 months! I highly doubt that I would be able to plough through so much writing if it weren't for all the kind comments/support that I've received. You guys have made my fanfic writing experience a stellar one, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Once again, many special thanks to all the wonderful people who worked hard to pick through my story: Ariel T, toraberushimeri, cicerothewriter. Special mentions go to darth-stitch (for her kind posts from her blanket fort that never cease to make me laugh), ceallaig1 (for being an awesome source of inspiration), littlebigspoon (the nicest person ever whom, I believe is one of the first people who followed me), and leaper182 (for her encouraging comments and unfailing support).

Also – you guys from tumblr, the ones who followed me and live to regret it 'cause I'm creeper, I love you. 8D

Anyway, with that said, I'm peacing out. School is starting and I need to haul ass, so I'm sad to say that I probably won't have a lot of time to write fanfics anymore. Thanks a bunch though, it's been fun. ;)

Extra Notes that I couldn't fit into this story:

[1] Mallor and Galion working – Haldan knew that if all five of them were to disappear at once, it would seem extremely suspicious. He devised a plan where Mallor and Galion would work during the morning hours, and Beren and Aldor would work in the evenings. That would give them the illusion of having been in Lake-town 24/7 and would also secure them some alibi to remove further suspicion on them.

[2] I assume that the distance between Lake-town to Erebor is approx. 40 miles. Apparently, the running speed of a pony is around 30 miles/hr, which means that it took the Company 1 hr 20 mins to get from Erebor to Lake-town in their mad dash to get there.

[3] Where is the key – Thorin realized that he could have easily asked Nori to lock pick the collars, but he was totally looking for an excuse to beat the ever loving shit out of the kidnappers. Also, he wanted the satisfaction of them surrendering the key to him.

[4] The kidnappers – they were tried for murder (of Mister Haldan), kidnapping and aggravated assault on a nobleman (Ori flushed at that title) and royal consort (Bilbo spluttered when he was referred to that). They were subsequently beheaded.

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Works inspired by this one:

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